The Devourer of Man

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The Devourer of Man

by HigherMagic

Summary

Hannibal steps to one side as Mason and Margot come onto the balcony. Mason always dresses finely when addressing new recruits, the gold on his wrists and around his neck highlighting the feral lust in his eyes. "Welcome!" he says, holding his hands out wide, smiling. "You have been blessed to find yourself in the house of Mason Verger, purveyor of the finest gladiators this Empire has ever seen!"

As he speaks, the gladiators cheer, raising their swords. Hannibal looks down the line of men. Most of them are weak-looking, simpering fools. "Prove yourself in the hard days to follow," Mason continues. Hannibal cannot help but notice that Will has his eyes on Mason, the same gleam in his eye that Hannibal has seen in many a man during his time in the arena. "Prove yourselves more to be common slaves – more than a man! Fail, and die," Mason adds, his smile widening. "Either here where you stand, or sold off to the mines. Succeed, however, and you will stand proud among my titans!"

Notes

so I watched too much Spartacus and this happened. please don't look to me for super accurate historical fiction this is VAGUELY Roman and that's all I can give you I'm sorry in advance. it's going to become explicit in the next chapter so I went ahead and marked it as such already.

Chapter 1

The markets are a cacophony of light and sound. The sun casts no shadow, as high up as it is midday. Children shriek their way through the clay-dry streets, barren after so long without rain. The heat is oppressive and thick, conjuring sweat even what little shade one can find amidst merchant stalls and under the arches of doorways, the light breeze from the ocean the only thing offering a modicum of relief. Hannibal follows in the footsteps of the man he once called master – no more, since he was freed after his time in the arena, but it's a hard habit to break after so long enslaved under the lanista's rule.

Mason Verger navigates the townspeople with the ambition and air of someone who would sooner see all their throats cut than engage in conversation with them. They journey to the docks, where the most recent shipment of men is due to arrive soon. Men from east of the Rhine, from Hibernia and Brittania; brutes from less evolved nations who have been shipped over the ocean to serve new masters in the mighty shadow of the Empire.

At Hannibal's side, Margot Verger pauses, a golden bracelet catching her eye in one of the merchant stalls. Hannibal stays with her, his hands held behind his back loosely, his eyes settling everywhere and nowhere as they do when he is out in the open with his masters. Margot is Mason's most beloved treasure, and it is Hannibal's job to keep her safe whenever they leave the villa.

"It's beautiful, is it not?" Margot says, holding up the bracelet for Hannibal to see. Indeed, it is a fine trinket, marked with the golden eagle of Rome, a ruby for its eye and bright pink stones forming a wreath around its head.

He smiles and gives her a cordial nod. She returns it, and sets the bracelet down.

"Thank you for accompanying us to the docks," she says, linking her arm in Hannibal's as they catch up to Mason's back. "I know my brother trusts your judgement when it comes to new recruits more than anyone else."

Hannibal nods. "It's no trouble," he replies. Technically, as a freed man, he is under no obligation to remain with the Vergers and submit to their whims, but if there is anything his time under Mason's ownership has taught him, it's that one's enemies can never be held too closely.

"Do you think there will be any of use?" Margot asks. "The last batch were…disappointing."

Hannibal nods. Mason Verger has his fingers in many assets, but his pride and joy is his ludus, and the training and financial gain of gladiators. After their training, they are to face Hannibal in their final test. Those that survive are given the brand and allowed to fight in the arena to earn their keep – and, in theory, their freedom. Hannibal is the only one so far to have achieved such a thing.

"We can only hope your gods smile upon us this day," he replies.

Margot laughs, slapping his arm playfully. "Our gods," she repeats teasingly. "Perhaps we should start praying to yours as well, so that they might relieve us of this heat and bring the rains."

Hannibal smiles, and follows Mason as he makes his way to the docks. He greets the shipmaster with a hearty cry, pulling him into a loose embrace and slapping the man on the back hard enough to knock the breath out of him. "Chilton, my good man!" he says. "What do you have for me today? I'm in the mood for a wildling."

Chilton is a man of too many words and not enough sense, in Hannibal's opinion. Although to say he is unintelligent would be a disservice to the man. He is clever in the way foxes are, until they come upon a pack of hunting dogs.

He smiles at Mason, his eyes gleaming as a man's do when the promise of a big sale sits in front of him. The Vergers are not without coin to buy all of his ship manifestos many times over. "This way," he says, peacocking and proud as the first line of slaves is ushered down the plank from the first ship and forced to march to a standstill in front of Mason, Margot, and Hannibal.

Hannibal sees immediately that this stock is far from optimal. They have been starved beyond reason and would serve little more use than to be put to work in the mines. A few have savage marks on their bodies from whips, their collars and cuffs chafing heavily at their necks, ankles, and wrists. Mason looks at Hannibal, and Hannibal gives a subtle shake of his head.

"Come now, Chilton, don't try and skimp on me," Mason says, smiling wide enough to show most of his teeth.

"I would never," Chilton replies. "All of these men are from east of the Rhine. Fine fighters, I would say. Their species is an animalistic sort."

"If I wanted animals, I'd fuck my own pigs," Mason says coolly, waving a dismissive hand at the line of men.

Chilton presses his lips together and glares at Hannibal, and Hannibal returns to the glare with a small smile. He still holds his title as champion of the arena, and everyone knows Mason relies on his expertise when it comes to the acquisition of new slaves. If Hannibal deems them unworthy, then no amount of silver tongues could persuade Mason to loosen his purse.

"Perhaps this next batch, then," Chilton says after a moment. He walks away from the first line, to a second. This one has two groups – one of women, naked and exposed and filthy. Mason gives them a vicious once-over, licking his lips when the first trembles and looks down at her feet.

"Margot?" he asks, turning to his sister.

Margot smiles, tight and close-lipped. She has no love of new slaves, Hannibal knows this. Her body slave is the only one she likes; Alana. Alana has been with Margot for many years

and bears the marks of her domina, and Hannibal knows they share a close friendship. Other house slaves are kept at the whim of her brother and have little more to look forward to than the life of a glorified whore.

She shakes her head, and Mason shrugs and continues towards the fighting men. "There are some Brittanians," Chilton says, holding his hand out to direct Mason's gaze. These men look stronger, either captured more recently or causing less commotion to earn the lash. Hannibal tilts his gaze to one side and Margot lets his arm go so he can step into place beside his master.

"Captured in the war, each and every one of these men is guaranteed to have fighting prowess," Chilton says, emboldened now that Hannibal hasn't rejected this batch outright. "I also have a few Syrians, and one man captured from Hibernia."

Mason taps his fingers against his chin, humming in thought as he looks over the men. He steps up to the first one and lifts his chin, meets eyes that are dulled with hunger and exhaustion. "What is their worth, I wonder?" he asks, smiling at Chilton, and steps away from the man.

Chilton smiles, but before he can speak, a commotion breaks out down the line towards a third ship. Not one of Chilton's, Hannibal knows. His attention is drawn, and he tenses, his hand going to his sword and on high alert as he sees a slave throw himself at a guard, teeth bared and eyes bright with outrage. He's shouting in a language Hannibal doesn't know, clawing at the guard's face with enough force and venom that it causes those he's chained to to stumble after him.

The guard kicks him back, growling an order to stay down, and draws his sword.

Hannibal smiles. "Dominus," he murmurs, catching Mason's attention, and nods towards the man. He releases his sword.

Mason's eyes light up, seeing as the man gets kicked in the chest, and the man snarls, grimacing and holding his stomach, baring his teeth when the guard kicks him in the face, drawing blood to his mouth. "Halt!" Mason calls, and moves away from Chilton towards the guard before he can bring his sword down on the slave.

The guard stops, giving a deferential bow as Mason comes to a stop in front of the man. The man's mouth is coated in blood, his eyes a bright blue the same color as a wild ocean, a thick mop of hair curling around his face and down his neck. He looks strong, his shoulders and thighs thickly muscled, a dark shadow of hair on his face.

Mason regards him coolly and Hannibal prowls to his side as the man turns his head, spits out a wad of bloody saliva, and straightens with another growl. His chains clink around his wrists as he rolls them, fists clenched up tightly.

"Who owns this man?" Mason asks to the crowd at large.

"I do," comes a reply. Hannibal turns to see the slave trader Gideon emerge from the crowd, his beady eyes narrowed and sharp. Gideon mostly provides slaves for less noble houses, and

for the mines. The man glares at Gideon and bares his teeth, uttering another short phrase in his language that Hannibal hardly bears the need for translation. "He's Hibernian, caught just last month with a clutch of his kin. They're a fierce people, but hardly fit for civilized company."

"How much?" Mason asks.

Gideon looks Mason over. "You're a lanista, yes?" he asks. Mason nods. "I appreciate your interest, but I don't think this mad dog would be of much use to you."

"Apologies," Mason replies, "I hadn't realized I'd asked for your opinion on his use. How much?"

Gideon pauses, pressing his lips together. "Thirteen gold coins," he replies, lifting his chin in challenge. Hannibal blinks – such a price for an untrained animal is ambitious at best, a downright insult at worst.

Mason smiles, and turns to Hannibal. "What do you think, old friend?" he asks.

Hannibal looks at the man. He stands tall, a little shorter than Hannibal himself, his body quivering like he wants to attack again. As Hannibal watches, he wipes his wrist under his bleeding nose and spits on the ground; an act of defiance.

Hannibal smiles. "It would be an interesting exercise to see if we can break a dog like that," he replies.

"Well said!" Mason crows, clapping Hannibal on the shoulder. "We'll take him. And the rest of your stock. Margot, see it handled, please. I must go meet with the grain merchants."

Margot nods, pulling her purse from her belt to make the exchange. All in all, it comes to thirty gold to purchase the entire line. Hannibal doesn't hold much hope for the rest, but for a man like Mason, any man is worth the meat he bears at the very least.

As they leave, Hannibal feels Chilton's insulted, murderous glare at his back. He smiles.

"Fresh meat!"

Hannibal watches from the balcony as the new recruits are ushered into the training yard, interrupting today's session. The Verger gladiators are a fierce, terrible sight to behold. Even the lowest branded man can and has killed many in the arena, and when they train, their wooden practice swords do nothing to curb their honed viciousness.

Alana stands by him on the balcony, raising her eyebrows as they're led in, still in chains. The guards take off their collars and cuffs once the doors are closed, held within a circle of the gladiators present. There are seven in total. "Your selection?" she asks.

Hannibal turns to her, smiling warmly. He likes Alana very much – he has known her as long as he has known Mason and Margot, and considers her a dear friend. "Yes," he replies. "Although I only put my recommendation towards one in particular."

"Which one?" she asks.

Hannibal nods to the Hibernian. His face is still stained with blood and he looks at the guard coming down the line to uncuff him the way an animal might eye approaching food. His fingers are curled around his chains, his shoulders tensed.

She makes a small, amused sound. "He looks like a troublemaker," she says lightly.

"Doctore tells each fighting man that they must fight for something in the arena. It is the only thing that keeps you alive, when all other hope is lost. Whether it's love, or glory, every man must fight for something." Hannibal pauses, his eyes on the man. He watches as the guard uncuffs him, and the man snarls at the guard, but doesn't attack. His eyes are dark in the shadow of his unruly hair. "I believe this man has something to fight for."

Alana smiles. "Don't tell me you're looking for another pet project," she says. "You remember what happened to the last one."

Hannibal nods. He remembers. "The only thing to learn from failure is how not to fail again," he tells her, and turns to look at her with another smile.

She returns it, and their attention is drawn at the sound of a whip crack. Jack is the current Doctore for Mason – the trainer of gladiators. He had been a capable warrior during his time, before suffering wounds that would forever keep him from the arena.

"You all stand before me and before this ludus, and you are slaves beholden to your master." As he speaks, one of the house slaves goes down the line, handing each man a wooden sword. "Forget everything you knew and were outside these walls. That is the world of men. We are more." Jack is a stern-faced man at the best of times. After the death of his wife, Hannibal has seen him smile on rare occasion, to be counted on one hand. "We are gladiators. Study, train, bleed for this ludus, and you will see your names become things of legend, to be cheered for in the arena, as many a great champion has gone before you."

Jack pauses, looking down the line. He stops at the bloody-faced man and rolls his shoulders when it seems that man is the only one meeting his gaze. He holds the wooden sword in readiness, like it is a real weapon and he would be capable of bringing Jack down in a single stroke. "You will do as commanded, without complaint, or see flesh stripped from bone."

The man doesn't lower his gaze. Jack's eyes narrow, and he approaches the man, whip uncurling, and comes to a stop in front of him. "What is your name?" he asks.

The man bares his teeth and doesn't answer.

Jack presses his lips together, and nods to Cordell – a brute of a man, and one of Mason's favorites. Cordell smiles and steps forward. The man turns, raising his sword to strike, and Cordell grabs his wrist and kicks him at the calf, sending him to his knees. The man

struggles, snarling in rage, and Cordell grabs his hair tightly, forcing his head up, and presses his sword to the man's throat.

"I'll ask again," Jack says. "You will not get a third time. What is your name?"

The man heaves a breath, his bared chest red and shining in the heat. The dirt on his shoulders will do little to shield him from the sun. Hibernia is a cold land, thick with clouds and fog, and Hannibal imagines this weather is far from what he's used to.

Finally, he swallows. "Will," he says.

Jack smiles, and nods again. Cordell releases Will and Will shoves himself to his feet, sending a glare that could spear a man towards Cordell. "Will," Jack says, and Will's eyes snap to him. "What is beneath your feet?"

Will looks down, kicking at the arena floor. "Sand," he replies.

The gladiators laugh, and Jack huffs, stepping back to address the whole group. "Cordell! What is beneath your feet?"

"Sacred ground, Doctore," Cordell replies, his smile wide. "Watered with tears of blood."

"Your tears," Jack says, pointing to Cordell. "Your blood," he adds, running his hand down the line. "Your pathetic lives forged into something of worth. Listen, and learn. And, perhaps, live, to become gladiators! Now, attend your master."

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The gladiators cheer again, their roar deafening to rival the call of the arena. Hannibal takes a deep breath, pressing his lips together when Will's eyes meet his. They narrow, and Will tilts his head to one side, as though he recognizes Hannibal and is trying to place him.

But the moment passes. Will's eyes track to Margot, and then Alana, before he looks down to the sword in his hand. His wrist turns, like he's testing the weight of the weapon.

He looks back up at Mason, and then Hannibal meets his gaze. He smiles, and gives a slight shake of his head. Oh, there is a wildness in Will, he can see that as plain as day. An

unrefined savagery that Hannibal is very much looking forward to bearing witness to.

Jack calls their attention back to him and they begin to train. The recruits will be given heavy pieces of lumber to carry to build up their strength, their fighting skill – if they possess any – will be tested and honed. Half of them won't make it to the test, and more still will fall in the final assessment.

Hannibal can't wait to see if Will makes it out the other side.

"My old friend," Mason says, drawing Hannibal's attention as the gladiators and trainees pair off and begin. Hannibal turns to him. "That Hibernian was a costly investment. I would like you to make sure he doesn't disappoint me too soon."

"If he even understands what's happening," Margot says lightly. "They speak Gaelic in that country, do they not?"

"One of the few languages I confess I do not know," Hannibal says.

"Alana knows it," Margot says. Alana nods. Her father was Hibernian, if Hannibal remembers correctly. She is the daughter of a stone hauler and one of the house slaves of the Legatus, and was purchased by Margot and Mason's father when they were still children. Margot turns to Alana and smiles at her, putting a hand on her arm. "I'm sure she could provide translation if needed."

"The whip is a universal language," Mason says with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Come, Margot. We are meeting with Praetor Dimmond and the lady Bedelia this afternoon. We must make sure the house is in order if we are to secure their patronage." He turns to Hannibal again. "See that I am not disappointed, old friend."

"Your will, my hands," Hannibal replies, earning another wide smile and a clap on the shoulder for the trouble. Mason, Margot, and Alana leave, and Hannibal turns his attention back to the training yard.

Above them, the sun beats down on their backs with a vengeance. The training sands end at an abrupt cliff, which no man could climb or survive if he fell. He sighs, and sends an errant thought up to whatever deity might be listening that rain would be very much appreciated.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

shows up four months late with starbucks
I lied, it's explicit next chapter, but here you have it!

Hannibal often wanders the walls and rooms of the ludus and villa when everyone else is asleep, save for those kept as guards and night-servants finishing their chores. As a freed man and ward of Mason Verger, he is allowed into the barracks below the main villa, welcome in the gardens and the stables. Even encouraged, should he desire, to take his pick of the household slaves to share the night with.

Back when he was a gladiator – and the practice is still just as popular, the only difference now being that he is not obligated to partake – it was commonplace, for the purposes of entertainment, to have warriors brought up and displayed like breeding bulls, picked and forced to mount a serving girl for the pleasure of the Romans. Distasteful, all in all, though Hannibal does not begrudge broken men for seeing it as a reward. Any pleasure is a reward, after a while down there, and one learns to find it where they can.

It has been six days since Mason purchased Will's troupe. Of the new men, two have died already – one of dehydration, though he was obviously malnourished before he got here. A second from breaking his neck, a blow too-heavy against the base of his shoulders from a savage hit.

Praetor Dimmond and the lady Bedelia had arrived just as scheduled, a day after Will and his group. Hannibal has met the lady Bedelia many times, for she was good friends with Mason and Margot's father, and has taken a liking to them well enough, provided there is always wine in her hand and a pretty slave boy to gaze upon.

Even as he thinks that, he passes by the corridor where the Praetor and Bedelia are being housed. There are candles, still-lit, and Hannibal frowns. He hardly doubts anyone is still awake at this hour, and knows too-well how a single unattended candle can quickly ignite and set a whole villa aflame. In this never-ending heat, everything might as well be kindling.

He prowls down the hallway, not wanting to wake anyone. As he approaches the room, he hears movement, and the guttural, low groan of a man. The Praetor. His head tilts, and he catches scents of oil, something musky and floral.

He presses his lips together, and closes his eyes when, equally-soft, he hears Bedelia moan in answer. He shifts his weight and swiftly moves away from them, his curiosity satisfied. He can only hope that, when they are finished, they put the candle out.

He leaves the main villa, and walks down to the gate separating the lanista and the brutes inside from the rest of the household. He pauses when he finds Alana there, her fingers curled around one of the thick bars of the gate, speaking in a low, hushed voice. He does not know the language she speaks.

On the other side of the gate is Will.

Will's eyes snap to him, and he bares his teeth in a snarl, standing abruptly. His hair has been cut, sitting close-shorn to his skull, and his body is wiry and tense, covered only to hide his cock in a crude bunch of rags that sit around his hips. Still, he looks strong, fierce and caked in blood and dirt.

Alana frowns, standing and brushing off her robes. "Hannibal," she says quietly. "What brings you here?"

Hannibal smiles at her. "Calm yourself, Alana," he says, and touches his knuckles in a brief, affectionate gesture to her upper arm. "I am not here to spy on you, nor to collect one of the dogs."

Will snarls, pacing half a step away from Hannibal, then back. He curls his fingers around the bars and jerks it, like he intends to break the lock with his bare hands. From his mouth spills a guttural mess of his own language, and Alana blinks, her eyes widening. When Hannibal looks at her, she has her mouth covered and looks like she's trying not to laugh. Her shoulders shake with the effort.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow as Will goes silent, growling again. "I don't suppose any of that was for polite company," he says.

Alana breaks, then, bending forward and covering her mouth with both hands in a vain attempt to stifle her laughter. Will tilts his head towards her, his expression softening, a smile quirking at the corners of his mouth. His eyes are gentle on her, and Hannibal looks between them. It is likely this is not the first time Alana has come down here, knowing Will's language. She has such a loving, trusting heart; perhaps she sees in Will some helpless stray animal that needs a gentle hand.

"He said he'd -." She stops, laughing again, and shakes her head. "I'm sorry, there's not really a good translation. Let's just say it was violent and very *specific*."

Will smirks, lifting his chin when Hannibal looks at him again. Hannibal steps up to him, noting with pleasure that he is taller than Will, and it forces Will to look up, to expose his neck in an effort to hold Hannibal's gaze.

His fingers curl at the gate, and his eyes are very dark in the low light emanating from just behind him, where there is a lantern.

"Alana," Hannibal says, without breaking gazes with Will. "Go back upstairs. The lady Bedelia will need attending to shortly, I'm sure."

Alana nods, obedient to a fault, and hurries upstairs. Will blinks, looks away from Hannibal to watch her go, and Hannibal smiles. He takes a step back and unhooks the gate key from his belt. Mason has the only other one in existence, and gave a copy to Hannibal when he was freed, in case he ever 'wanted to feel like a man again'. Hannibal isn't sure whether he was referring to the feel of a man's flesh under his sword, or his hand. Molson Verger favored the Greek lifestyle, it has been said.

He opens the heavy lock on the gate and steps inside, and Will stands back, fingers curled by his side, upper lip twitching to show his teeth. Hannibal locks the gate behind him, smiling when Will's eyes flash with disappointment, an idea stamped out before given true life. Will is wild, and his plans as a result will be half-cocked, until he has learned to calm himself down, to think like the Romans do.

He pockets the key, and walks to the left, hands behind his back. He smiles when, after a moment, he sees Will's shadow at his side and hears Will's quiet breath as he follows. They walk under the awning, and Hannibal sees, within the basement of the villa, the other cages where the gladiators and trainees sleep. The new recruits all sleep as dogs, piled atop each other with nothing but rags and stray pieces of hay as bedding. The seasoned warriors, those who earned the brand, get cells of their own – which are more comfortable, somewhat. At least they have a bed and a place to retreat for solitude.

He walks to the cliffs, and smiles as Will comes to a stop beside him. They stand there, gazing out to the ocean, the chill wind and the night air providing some reprieve, but with it comes salt, and their skin is dry and tacky, their mouths cracking at the corners in search of water.

"Do you know much of the common tongue?" he asks.

Will tilts his head at the sound of his voice, and grunts, spitting down the cliffs.

"'Common' is a good word for it," he says. His voice is heavy, accented, so unlike the upturned noses and haughty enunciations of the Romans. They believe their language will live forever. "Common as grass."

"Ah," Hannibal says, smiling. "So you are somewhat fluent."

Will tilts his head. "You are not Roman," he says, and Hannibal nods. "Where are you from?"

"The East, over vast mountains and deserts," Hannibal replies.

"Yet you walk among them."

"I was given my freedom after a great victory in the arena," Hannibal says, and looks over his shoulder, towards the barracks. "A gift few will ever receive, if any of these sorry fools even think to dream of it." Will grunts, head tilted, brow furrowed. "Some of them come here, for a wage. Some, for glory." He looks to Will, meets his storm-blue eyes. "Some because they have no other choice."

"And you?" Will asks, stepping closer. "Why are you here?"

Hannibal tilts his head, and sighs, putting his eyes to the ocean again. How many prayers would convince the Roman god of water to donate some of his vast empire to the clouds, to his brother, so that the Heavens might open and wet the ground. Roman gods are greedy things.

"Perhaps a story for another time, Will," he murmurs.

Will tilts his head, and sighs, looking out to the ocean again. Hannibal regards him, eyeing the way Will's shoulders are starting to fill from his strength training, the flatness of his stomach and the very subtle tremble of his fingers in the wake of the cold air. Yet he does not protest – perhaps it reminds him of home.

Will rolls his shoulders, lifts his chin, like he can feel Hannibal's eyes on him. The arch of his throat and his pale skin stand out, glowing like a fallen star. He really is quite lovely, though Hannibal will admit he preferred it when Will's hair was longer. But it will grow. There are circles beneath his eyes from many nights of restless sleep, and long days buried under the burning sun.

"You should be resting," Hannibal tells him. "Wasting the few hours of reprieve you are given in speaking to your master's servants is…unwise."

Will's brow lowers, a flash of vague confusion crossing his face – clearly Hannibal used a word Will doesn't know. But context is a generous creature.

"Too hungry to sleep," Will replies, after a very, very long silence.

Hannibal tilts his head. "I know the rations are somewhat lacking," he says mildly.

Will lets out a short, impatient huff. "I don't eat those," he says.

"Why?" Hannibal asks, eyebrows lifting. "It is all the food you will get, unless your intention is to starve here and make Mason and I look the fool."

Will lifts his chin and fixes Hannibal with a look that is not quite defiance – more aggravation, as though Hannibal is telling him the wrong answer to a riddle. But he does not answer right away – his eyes flit to the side, towards the barracks, and he licks his lips, shoulders sagging down.

Finally, he says; "I do not want to starve."

Hannibal smiles, and touches Will's arm with his knuckles, as he did to Alana. "Then you must eat," he replies.

Will licks his lips again, swallowing, and nods. "I will."

Hannibal nods to him again, and turns away. "Get some sleep," he tells Will, and heads back to the gates. By the time he crosses the halls again, the light from the Praetor's room is out, and he hears no more moaning.

He retires to his room, which is a modest space beside the entrance to the kitchen. In it he has a bed just large enough to fit himself, two shelves which contain books he has purchased with Mason's wage to him, and a single, large knife, that he keeps very, very sharp.

Just in case.

He sighs, rubbing his hands over his face. He wants a bath, but it is too late for him to want to bother the servants, and he is lazy enough to wait, to avoid doing it himself. A similar conclusion meets the request from his empty stomach. The thought of eating nowadays, with so little water, is close to torture. No wonder Romans are drunk from their wine all the time – dehydrated and with nothing else to drink, it's a wonder they don't all expire like old grain.

Hannibal wakes to a cry of alarm, and surges to his feet just as he hears Mason furiously calling for him. He is passably dressed by the time the man pushes open the door to his rooms, his face a red mask of fury as he fixes glassy eyes on Hannibal.

"Come here!" he says. "Come here and see what your savage has done!"

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, but throws on a loose-fitting shirt the color of old clay that falls to his knees, fastening his belt around it as he follows Mason out of his room, down the hallway, to the balcony that overlooks the ludus.

Will is there, on his knees, Jack's whip around his neck and two gladiators holding out sharp swords to stop him moving. He's been restrained, hands behind his back, and there are bruises on his face and shoulders, blackening around his stomach from several hard kicks.

His face is covered in blood. Not his own – it coats his jaws and cheeks, drips down his stomach like he tried to eat something whole, tried to swallow it down like a serpent. The blood is dried under the harsh, unforgiving sun, staining Will a lovely red. Yet wet at his mouth, saliva thick, shining.

Margot and Alana are there already, Margot's eyes wide and cupping her throat as Mason whirls on her, spearing her with his mad gaze. "I'll have your hide if Praetor Dimmond or the lady Bedelia hear of this. Distract them and make sure they do not come out here!"

Margot nods swiftly, and leaves. Alana makes to follow but Mason's hand snaps out and wraps around her wrist, yanking her to his side opposite Hannibal.

"Not you," he snarls. "You speak this dog's language, don't you?"

Alana nods, wincing when Mason's hand tightens around her wrist. Hannibal presses his lips together and lets out a growl of warning – one that goes ignored.

Will, it seems, is not so calm. Hannibal's attention is drawn as the man surges to his feet to a chorus of yells from Jack and those posted by him, and he lunges, Jack's whip pulling tight

around his neck. His eyes are fixed, wild and bright, on Mason's face, and from his mouth falls a litany of things that sound like curses.

Mason glares at him. "What is he saying?" he says.

Alana trembles, looks to Hannibal to help – but what can he do? Even as a freed man, no one would take mercy on him or the slaves if he were to raise his hand to Mason. "He wants you to let go of me," Alana says. "That's all I can really – *dominus*, please."

"Dominus," Hannibal says, trying to keep his voice calm. He reaches out and carefully covers Mason's hand, uncurls his fingers, finds Alana's arm bruise-pink and warm to the touch. She gives him a nod of thanks and Will, below them, finally subsides, his yelled snarls going silent. "Dominus," Hannibal says again, catching Mason's eyes. "Alana will speak for him, if she needs to." Mason glares at him, shrugging his robes with a huff, and brushes past them both. Hannibal goes to Alana's side, checking her wrist, finding it injured but not broken. She curls her fingers and sucks in a breath, jumping when Mason whirls on her.

"Come on, fragile thing," he says, and gestures for her to come stand by him. Hannibal follows, and takes a place between their shoulders, so that he can watch, but also intervene should Mason lay a hand on Alana again.

Alana clears her throat, rubbing at her bruised wrist, and looks to Will. He's been brought to his knees again, this time Jack has a sword and is holding it to Will's collarbones, his large, dark hand in what remains of Will's hair, tugging his chin up sharply to expose his throat.

"Will," Alana says, and then speaks in their shared language. Hannibal does not know it, and wonders if she might teach him.

Will swallows when she's done, and snarls, shoulders rolling, and he bares his bloody teeth, only to wince and growl when Jack jerks his head, keeping him on his knees. His answer, when it comes, is soft.

Alana's eyes widen, and she looks as though she wants to cover her mouth. Her face is a mask of disgust, of revulsion, of fear.

"What did he say?" Mason says, very quietly.

"He…. I asked him why he killed Cordell. He said he was hungry."

Hannibal blinks. Will killing Cordell is no small feat – and, Hannibal understands now why Mason was so angry. Cordell has long been one of his favorite fighters, worth his hefty weight in coin. Will shouldn't have even been able to get a blow in.

Mason snarls, turning on his heel and storming into the next room. Hannibal follows. "This cannot stand!" Mason yells, and turns on Hannibal as though it is his fault. "I cannot have my men slaughtering each other, turning their backs on their own brothers!"

Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "Technically," he replies, knowing with an internal smile that what he says will only enrage Mason further; "Will is not one of them. Not yet. He hasn't

earned the brand."

"I'll beat his pretty face in with that Jupiter-forsaken brand before I let him draw another breath!"

"Now, dominus. Mason." Hannibal comes forward, takes Mason's shoulders and stops his wild pacing. Mason looks at him with wide, half-crazed eyes, like those of a starving animal. "This could be beneficial to the ludus." Mason blinks at him, frowning. "Will is a foreigner, fresh meat. Cordell has been a favorite for a long time – news of his demise will spread fast, and far." Hannibal pauses, waits for Mason to set first foot into the trap. "People will pay heartily to see what kind of dog could beat him."

Mason tilts his head, and Hannibal lets him go, knowing the seed has been planted. Indeed, Mason heaves a breath, and runs a hand through his sandy, off-blond hair.

"Praetor Dimmond cannot hear a word of this," he says, softly.

"Of course not," Hannibal purrs. "No one in this ludus will turn on you, Dominus. Your word is law."

Mason nods, almost to himself, and then draws close and takes Hannibal's elbow. "I would ask a favor of you, old friend," he says.

Hannibal lifts his brows.

"Watch this Hibernian. Befriend him. A man who eats his own kind is a man who must always be watched."

"I agree," Hannibal replies.

Mason nods. "You will train him yourself," he says, and Hannibal blinks, brows rising again. Unbidden, a smile somewhat pleased crosses his face, but he schools his expression before Mason sees it. "I will tell Doctore that his training will be exclusively under you." He nods, rubbing his thumb over his lower lip, his smile turning lecherous and sly. "Yes. You're right – fresh meat will bring the crowds, will see us back in the arena, and if your Will is as strong and as fierce within it, he will bring us great fortune."

Hannibal smiles.

"Perhaps, even, some rain, Neptune willing!"

"Neptune willing," Hannibal echoes, and thinks of the oceans in Will's eyes.

"Now, Hannibal," Mason adds, notably calmer now, but he begins to pace, as he does when he's thinking. "You shall have access to him day and night. I am relying on you, old friend, to shape a weapon of war out of this dog." He stops, and looks at Hannibal. "If he falls in the arena, I will be very displeased."

"You can place your faith in me, dominus," Hannibal replies coolly, his smile wide.

Mason nods. "Good."

He sweeps back out to the balcony, and Hannibal follows, casting Alana another look to make sure she's alright. She must have heard most of their conversation, for she seems relieved – relieved, perhaps, that her friend will not be slaughtered like a rabid animal.

Will is breathing harshly, his strong thighs and shoulders shaking from the strain of kneeling for so long. "Doctore," Mason calls, and Jack looks up. "Release him."

Jack blinks, but obeys, unwinding the whip from Will's neck and removing his sword. The other gladiators step away as well, and Will, after a moment, staggers to his feet. Mason leans on the balcony, fingers curled, and grins wolfishly down at Will.

"Today's your lucky day, dog," he says. Will lifts his chin, blood shining wetly on his mouth. "Doctore, come up to me. I would have words." Jack nods, coiling his whip, and sheaths his sword, heading into the villa. "The rest of you, get back to your training!"

The gathered warriors nod, and disperse, going back to the pairs they were in before all the commotion. The trainees are using wooden swords against an upright post, training their sword arms, strengthening their hits. Newer recruits are carrying heavy pieces of lumber in a circle, building up their muscles.

Within it all, Will stands, and his eyes meet Hannibal's. As Hannibal watches, he wipes the back of his hand over the blood smeared on his cheek, brings the saddle of his thumb to his mouth, and licks it clean.

He grins.

Hannibal tilts his head to one side, and looks to Alana. "Come with me," he says, and takes her hand. She nods, following swiftly, and he brings her outside the meeting room next to the balcony, where Mason is waiting for Jack. As they exit, Jack enters, and he and Hannibal exchange a look of seasoned warriors, a nod of respect.

Hannibal takes Alana to the end of the hallway and cups her arms. "Are you alright?" he asks her.

She nods, breathing out shakily, rubbing her wrist. "Thank you," she replies.

"Did Will say anything else?"

She shakes her head. "Just more curses, more threats of violence," she says, and smiles, somewhat affectionate. "He has a great passion in him."

Hannibal smiles. "I do not begrudge you your regard, but you must be careful, with men like that," he tells her. She frowns, lifting her eyes to meet his. "He killed and ate a man, Alana."

Her frown deepens. "Hannibal," she says, and touches his arm. She bites her lower lip, consideration dark in her eyes, as though debating telling him something. "What do you know of Hibernia?"

"Very little," Hannibal replies. "I know it is wet, and cold, and green. I've been told Hibernians are wild, savage creatures, and worship stones and grass."

She laughs, rolling her eyes. "They have gods, just like we all do," she replies. "But there are…other things. Other creatures, that they believe walk within the world beside us. Demons, and demigods, just as the Romans do."

Hannibal tilts his head to one side.

"I believe Will is one of them."

He blinks at her, and drops his hands.

She shifts her weight, one hand curling through her hair and tugging it down one side of her neck. She looks down, to the side of her, in the direction of the barracks. "You believe he is a demigod," Hannibal says.

"Not in the way the Romans would say it," Alana replies. "He's not born from one of them. But there is a creature, I don't remember the name for it. It feasts on the life force of men. On their blood, their flesh." She lifts her eyes again. "On other things."

"Other things," Hannibal repeats.

Her cheeks color, and she swallows, touching her hair again. "I will be cautious," he tells her, smiling. "Go attend to your domina, and make sure she is taken care of. I will handle Will."

She nods, and Hannibal leaves her to go down to the training ground. He finds Will still standing there, bloodied and fine, and Will's chin lifts, his eyes flash in something like challenge as Hannibal approaches him. Hannibal takes two wooden swords from the pile and brings them to Will.

Hannibal smiles at him. "Are you still hungry, Will?" he asks.

Will licks his lips, his eyes raking Hannibal up and down. "Starving," he murmurs.

Hannibal's smile widens, shows his teeth, and he throws Will a sword. Will catches it, spins it in his grip and slides into a ready stance. "Well, you must earn your food like the rest of us," he says, and brings his sword up to his own ready position. "Let's begin."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They train for the entire remainder of the day. Jack returns as the sun is reaching its peak, and watches the new recruits and the seasoned fighters while Hannibal keeps his entire attention on Will. Will is a capable fighter, at least fast and smart enough to parry or dodge, but the savagery Hannibal had witnessed on the docks, the wild feral light in his eyes he'd seen not even an hour ago, is gone, stomped out like kicking ash into a fire to make the flames die.

He frowns, considering. Will watches him – does not lunge, does not take advantage of any opening. Rather, he waits, head tilted, eyes narrowed against the bright glare of the day.

"Hesitation will get you killed, in the arena," Hannibal says.

Will's head tilts further, and Hannibal growls, and lunges. He grabs Will by his makeshift mess of rags, yanking him into an awkward collision with Hannibal's body, and brings his wooden gladius to Will's neck. "See?" he says, brows raised and a smile on his face as Will gasps, jaw clenching, eyes flashing ocean-dark as he looks up at Hannibal.

Then, Hannibal feels the tip of Will's own sword, nudging up under his arm. Will grins, teeth still bloodied.

"See?" he replies, taunting.

Hannibal huffs, and lets him go, and Will's sword drops. "I could have slit your throat before your blade found its mark," he says dryly, for everything is dry nowadays. Gods, what he might give for a bit of *rain*. Anything but the blister-salt of sea air on bruises and cuts, the endless, *endless* stretch of sand and desert. His own home was a place of vibrancy and life, thick trees with their hanging boughs, grass long enough to touch one's knee. Flowers and harsh stone and water, always water. He thinks of it, and wonders if Will's home bears any resemblance.

He sighs, and gestures for Will to lower his weapon. "Come this way," he says, and hands his and Will's wooden sword to the serving boy who stands in the shade. He's barely a child, wide-eyed and slim and tan, and looks at Will like he's a monster. Hannibal smiles, and they pass him. Hannibal catches his wrist behind his back, walking tall as Will stalks behind him, dog-like, prowling.

He goes to Cordell's cell. It is the same as Hannibal imagines they found it, this morning, save for the flies that have begun buzzing about the place. The cell itself is almost lavish, the same parallel niceties as Hannibal's own. The sandstone walls are swept with blood like a great tidal wave ran through it, the body, still-remaining – Hannibal senses they will wait until nightfall to move it, so that it doesn't bake in the sun. Cordell had been gutted, but there is a bite mark on his cheek, his nose has been ripped clean off him. His eyes, wide and staring and whited out in death, sit in his rolled-over head, his neck snapped.

His chest has been clawed open, and Hannibal frowns, stepping forward. His heart, his liver, and most of his entrails are either removed or torn to shreds. And Hannibal knows the solidness of bone, knows the harsh attempt to break it with bare hands.

No mortal man could have done this.

He straightens, and thinks of Alana's words.

Will has not entered the cell with him. Hannibal emerges from it, sees him standing as straight as any centurion, head tilted up, hands at his sides. Yet his eyes watch Hannibal, watch and assess. Hannibal tilts his head, and Will does nothing but lift his chin a little higher.

"Mason wanted to kill you, for what you did," Hannibal murmurs, but speaks lowly, lest the walls and the dead man hear them. Will's upper lip curls, just briefly. "I convinced him to let you fight, instead. News of you defeating Cordell will travel far, great crowds will gather to see you in the arena." He pauses, waits for Will's reaction, and when none comes, he adds; "It's my job to make sure you don't die within thirty seconds of entering that ring."

He's not sure if Will even understands half the words he's saying, but he must get his point across, for Will huffs, drops his eyes, and looks away.

Hannibal growls, taking his chin and bringing their eyes together again. "First lesson," he says roughly, tightening his nails in Will's throat. "Stop baring your damn neck, lest someone open it for you."

Will's eyes flash, chin tilting in a brief show of defiance – but then he settles, sighs, and nods, wincing when Hannibal squeezes once more for good measure, and then lets his hand drop. His palm is pink, stained with the blood on Will's neck, melted with sweat. In the low light of the single lantern marking the gate to the villa, he shines as sunlight on metal, sea foam on a wave.

Will shifts his weight, looks at Hannibal as though he's something strange, full of consideration. "How long, do you think?" he asks. "Until you deem me ready?"

"That will depend," Hannibal replies. "I am not a kind teacher, Will, and I do not teach as Doctore does. But, if you apply yourself, and obey my every command, I could see you stepping into the arena in a month or two."

Will lets out a breath, his eyes widening, flashing panicked to Hannibal's face. "A *month*?" he demands, and shakes his head, baring his teeth. His fingers clench, curl, and he snarls, showing the red around his gums. The flex of his jaws is sharp and angry, and Hannibal tilts his head, considering him. "I can't wait a month. I'll starve."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, and looks to Cordell's body. Then back at Will. "If you ate the rations provided to you -."

"That's not -." Will stops, rubbing his hands over his hair. His fingers curl, try to tug, and he snarls in frustration when he remembers that his hair has been shaved. Instead, he hooks his

fingers around the back of his sunburnt neck and glares Hannibal's way, at his feet. "I thought you understood," he whispers.

Hannibal sighs, through his nose, and steps close to Will. Will drops his hands, eyes wide as Hannibal wraps a hand around the back of his neck, brings their foreheads together like he would for any seasoned gladiator, anyone he called 'brother' within this ludus. Though most of them are gone now, to the next life.

Will trembles beneath him, exhaustion and strain, sharp with sweat and blood. He needs a bath, desperately, but will likely not get one unless he's called up for one of Mason's parties, or the more private breeding shows that ladies of certain esteem hire Mason's dogs for. So savage, the Romans. Blood and sex and violence, that's what they crave.

Will closes his eyes, jaw tense, but he's lax under Hannibal, unresisting. Hannibal sighs, lets them rest together a moment more, and then he straightens.

"Eat what they give you, Will," he says, and leads the way back to the battleground. He takes two wooden swords from the servant boy again and throws one to Will, who catches it and turns it in his hand so the 'blade' rests along his forearm. "Sleep when they say, rest when they say, and when they tell you to fight, you will do so until you can no longer lift your sword, until your knees fail you. Until the sand beneath your feet feels like mercy, and death like reward."

Will huffs, and mutters something in his own language under his breath. Hannibal turns, regarding him with one raised eyebrow, and Will does not flush as though ashamed, nor tense as though afraid of Hannibal's wrath. Rather, he smiles, off-kilter and dimpling his cheeks, like Hannibal would find the joke funny too, if he understood it.

Hannibal is starting to get the impression that there's a lot he does not understand.

He readies himself, sheds the discomfort of the high-noon sun, the ache in his belly that speaks of hunger, the soreness of his muscles. He stands ready, and meets Will's eyes.

Smiles.

"Shall we?"

"Alright, that's enough!"

Jack's voice rings out clearly enough that the snap of his whip is unnecessary. The gladiators part and the trainees stop beating their wooden post, carrying their pieces of mast. The heavy thuds of them being dropped echo with a chorus of grateful moans.

"Return your weapons and go eat," Jack says, and gives a nod towards Hannibal, who returns it. They disperse, and yet Will does not straighten, does not relax. His wild eyes are on Hannibal. He has bruises on his back and chest now from Hannibal's blows, a splinter-cut on

his forehead with a thin trail of blood leaking down. His bare muscles shiver and tremble under the cold wind, with exhaustion, and yet he had not, once, stopped fighting. Not asked for mercy or respite – Hannibal admires that about him. If nothing else, stamina and determination can save one's neck in the arena if sheer skill cannot.

Hannibal tilts his head, circles Will as Will circles him, strides slow and even, back bent, ready at any moment to lunge or parry. His knuckles whiten. Hannibal feints to the side, watches Will hiss and turn to deflect, and Hannibal spins his sword around and brings it down towards Will's shoulders. Will ducks, catching the tip on his arm, and knocks it away with his own sword, jumping a few steps to get distance again.

"Aren't you hungry, Will?" Hannibal ask, and it isn't a taunt. Hannibal is hungry – starving, in fact, and the faint scents of bread and lamb stew are making their way into the fighting space. The sand is littered with droplets of blood – the seasoned warriors, on occasion, train with real weapons, and Jack's whip can draw blood when he uses it right – and is now hard-baked by the sun, rough and grinding on his feet, on his ankles.

He would like to rest, and is sure Will is exhausted. And yet, he fights.

Will growls, darts forward like a bull to rush Hannibal, and then he stops, skids low with his sword angled for Hannibal's knee. Hannibal dodges to one side, deflecting it, but the sword ends up sliding up his thigh instead and he winces – it would be a devastating blow with a real weapon. But the position has put Will in a crouch and so he's easy to kick, right in the stomach, and it sends him sprawling onto his back.

Will gasps, winded, and Hannibal goes to him, puts the arch of his foot over Will's wrist and bears down so he's forced to drop it.

Will looks at him for a moment, a moment longer. The others are watching them, Hannibal can feel their eyes; a heady cocktail of scorn and intrigue. Most of them are too green to have ever seen Hannibal fight, except for their own trial, and certainly Will's reputation has grown claws and teeth between them now. He did, after all, murder a man in cold blood, and consumed his flesh.

Will winces when Hannibal doesn't let up the pressure. He curls towards Hannibal, reaches out and smooths his palm, warm and wide, on Hannibal's calf. Taps, twice.

"I yield," he murmurs.

Hannibal lets out a pleased hum, crouches down to pick up Will's sword – Will gritting his teeth and growling, as Hannibal's foot is still on his wrist – and then Hannibal steps away, returning the items to the lingering slave boy. He comes back to Will, finds him sitting and rubbing his wrist, and holds out a hand.

Will's eyes meet his, shining in the light from the torches that have been lit and surround the barracks, the gates to the main road. He looks ethereal, something wild and otherworldly, and he reaches up with his bruised wrist, fingers wrapping tight around Hannibal's forearm. Hannibal mimics him and hauls him to his feet in a single motion. Will sags, briefly, shoulders touching, and then he straightens, and Hannibal lets him go.

Hannibal smiles. "You should eat, Will," he says.

Will raises a brow, challenging. "And who should I eat?"

Hannibal's attention is drawn by a loud series of grunts, the slick sound of a mass of dead flesh falling to the ground. He turns, Will at his shoulder, to see a few of the trainees hauling Cordell's body – or doing their level best, he was a very large man – out of his cell and over the training field, towards the medical room and the place where they dismember dead flesh and throw it into a tunnel that leads to the ocean, or grind up the meat to feed to the dogs and pigs.

Will snarls, a loud and wild sound, and the trainee nearest him flinches, dropping Cordell's shoulder. The body falls and more of his intestines spill out, as well as the dark slip of his kidneys, his lungs pierced by the broken rib cage.

Will stalks past Hannibal, still growling though it rumbles like a purr, like a giant hunting cat. He eyes the trainees, chin raised, and then bends down near the mess of organs. His fingers trail idly, through slick, and he huffs, discarding intestines. They slop over the trainees and they each watch each other nervously, clearly terrified by their companion's behavior.

Hannibal himself is delighted, intrigued.

Will curls his fingers through the mess, rises with Cordell's kidneys in his hands. He grins at the other men, nodding his head as though in thanks, and then tilts his head back, pouring the first one into his mouth like supping from an oyster shell. It bares his throat, and Hannibal watches as the slick, blood-pink juice slips down his hand, his wrist, his forearm. His mouth, his chin, now stained and wiping away old blood and sweat with fresher kills.

His mouth waters. Hannibal is enthralled.

Will eats the second one, one bite then another, devouring the second kidney just as quickly. His shoulders roll, and he sighs, eyes shining in the firelight. The air around him is silent, and waits like the verdict of the arena host, a thumb up or down that will tell them if they will see another day.

Will sighs again, licking the saddle of his thumb, tongue snaking out and curling around his forefinger and sliding up. He meets Hannibal's eyes and smiles, slick and soft. Hannibal feels the heat in that smile, feels a flicker of warmth in his chest, and blinks, rolls his shoulders, tries to recover.

Finally, tension snaps. Hannibal realizes he's the only one to make it so. He straightens, clears his throat, and looks meaningfully at the terrified trainees. "Well?" he commands, and they scatter into action as mice when presented with a cat. One of them, hands shaking, scoops up Cordell's innards and tries to throw them back inside, visibly close to retching. Will doesn't watch them, doesn't move his eyes from Hannibal's. His smile does not waver.

"Mars willing, I will never fight that man." Hannibal tilts his head, looks to see that it was one of the newer gladiators who had spoken. Hannibal served him his trail not two months

past. He'd barely made it. The brand of Mason's mark is still red and raw-looking on his forearm.

Beside him, the serving boy swallows. "That's no man," he says, whisper-soft.

"Hannibal," Will murmurs, and Hannibal turns to him, finds Will standing much closer. Will reaches out, tilts his head to show that maddening, inviting arch of his throat, smiles and presses his callused fingers gently to Hannibal's forearm.

Hannibal raises his eyebrows, and Will lifts his gaze, lifts his smile, to the dusk sky, cloudless and clear. He sighs, and drops his eyes to meets Hannibal's. Takes another step closer.

Leans in, their shoulders touching, lips to Hannibal's ear; "There's more than one way to devour a man," he whispers. Hannibal's fingers flex, his stomach grows sharp. His teeth ache, incensed by the close, open invitation of Will's neck. Is this glamor, is this enchantment? He cannot be sure, but he knows in all his years no one has so enthralled him like Will has. His touch burns, his low voice is welcoming, alluring. Will turns his head, cheek brushing Hannibal's just briefly, and pulls back. "I would have words with you, if you will allow them. Later tonight."

Then, he lets go, and walks to the cliffs. Sits at their edge. Hannibal's fingers flex, and he curls them tightly, still able to feel the warmth of Will's touch, the tendrils of heat as though touched by the Roman sun god. He presses his lips together, licks them, feeling them suddenly dry.

He turns and sees his fellows watching him, half-wary. He clears his throat and recovers, striding towards the gate. "All of you should rest," he tells them. "The Praetor and his wife are visiting your dominus, and he will want you all in top shape to earn their patronage."

He leaves through the gate, locking it behind him, and almost runs into Alana as she hurries down the stairs. She gasps, darting to one side and almost collides with the wall – would, if Hannibal did not catch her, hand flattening over her arm so his knuckles take the blow instead.

"What has you in such a hurry?" he asks her, amused.

Alana huffs, rolling her bright eyes. "The lady Bedelia is out of wine," she says, and finishes her walk, to the stores in the cellar by the gate. She takes a jug and carries it tight to her chest, and she and Hannibal walk together back to the main villa. "And how fares our friend? Margot told me Mason put him under your charge."

"Word travels fast," Hannibal replies, smiling. But he nods. "I believe what you said to be true – either that, or Hibernians are much more savage than we give them credit for."

Alana laughs. "No," she replies. "My father was no such man. Or beast. They have fierce warriors as all great nations do, but my memory sees them gentle, one with nature. Not in their souls to seek to do harm."

"Will does harm," Hannibal reminds her. "Grievous harm. He killed a man – one of Mason's top fighters. It was only my words that spared him."

"A debt I would see repaid a thousand times," Alana replies. "For myself, and for Will."

Hannibal swallows, thinking of the warmth in his chest, the way his mouth had watered upon seeing Will's neck. "This creature you believe he is," he says, voice low so no one else might hear, and he turns to her, seeking her eyes. "What is the nature of it?"

She swallows, darts her eyes from side to side in fear of the walls sprouting ears, and leans in close to him; "It appears as a man or woman," she says. "It's said it has the power to charm mortals to its lair with just a look, just a touch." Hannibal swallows, and thinks of how Will's handprint still warms his skin. "It will find you, lure you to its lair, and eat you alive. Or…" Her cheeks turn pink.

"Is this those 'other things' you mentioned?" Hannibal asks, smiling despite himself.

She fixes him with a stern look. "There are variations of the legend," she says. "My mother would tell me the first version. When I was older, my father told me the second." Her cheeks darken. "They say this creature will happily consume any piece of a man or woman that gives life. And, well what gives life above all else?"

Hannibal blinks, straightening in understanding.

"So sex can sate this creature, as much as blood and flesh."

She shrugs one shoulder. "So the legend goes."

"Interesting," he murmurs.

Her head tilts.

Hannibal shakes off his thoughts and gives her a gracious smile. "Go attend your mistress and her guests," he says, and she nods, hefting the jug of wine. "I may join them later, once I am more presentable."

She grins at him. "You're never presentable, my friend."

Hannibal laughs, and watches her go. Then, he heads towards his own room, fetching a bucket of water and a clean cloth from the room where they wash linens and robes. He carries it to his room and sets it down, shedding his stained tunic, belt, and boots. He cups his hands in the water, splashing his face, and sighs when his fingers come back pink, touched with the remnants of the blood Will smeared on his skin.

He licks his lips, fingers curling, and washes himself with the cloth, wiping away the sweat and mud from the day. Without those scented oils Margot loves so much, he will certainly not smell particularly pleasant and floral like high society, but he will not smell like grit and wounded men.

And yet, although his stomach is clenching with hunger and his bones and muscles ache, the idea of reclining with the Vergers and their guests settles uncomfortably. Bedelia likes him well enough, and he has caught enough assessing looks from Praetor Dimmond to know interest when he sees it, but Mason is grating, and Margot in the company of her brother acts as a timid doll. He finds himself thinking, for all his wildness and ill-spoken tongue, that Will would be much more preferable company.

Which he should be cautious of, if Alana's words are true. If Will is a creature of myth and legend, he might be working his magic on Hannibal right now, and intends to kill him when everyone else is asleep.

And yet, Hannibal has already decided. He dons a thick set of robes that reach his ankles, puts sandals on his feet, and wraps his belt around his hips with the gate key. He contemplates taking his knife, but to bring a weapon into the ludus is foolish, regardless of intent.

He goes down to the gate, opens and locks it behind him. Will is still at the cliffs, his back marred with bruises and blood, shining with dried sweat. Hannibal thinks of how he'd looked with longer hair, how the wind might play with it, caress with gentle fingers and tug on the ends.

He approaches.

Will is singing.

His voice is low, gentle as he watches the water, and the tune is soft and rises and falls like the crest of waves. It is in his language, Hannibal is sure, and conjures a feeling of yearning, of searching. He steps up beside Will, and sits next to him. Will's leg hangs off the cliffside, his other pulled up so he can rest his folded arms on his knee.

Hannibal mimics him. He stops, and slants his gaze to Hannibal. He smiles.

"What is that song?" Hannibal asks, his breath catching at the light in Will's eyes. The sky is dark, now, the only light coming from the fires on the walls, painting him in gold.

Will hums, rests his cheek on his arms, and breathes deeply, blinking slowly. "A song for the sea," he replies.

The air is silent, save for the breeze, the crash of waves against the bluff below them. Too far to jump, unless one intends to meet the gods.

"It's lovely," Hannibal says.

Will's smile widens, his lashes dip, and he sighs, straightening his head so his chin rests on the backs of his knuckles. "The men talk," he says, and Hannibal blinks at him. "They call me *belua*. What is that word?"

Hannibal huffs. "It means 'monster'," he says. "Something evil, beast-like."

"Ah." Will grins, coy, playful. "Am I a monster, then?"

"I do not think so," Hannibal replies. "I would not give your ego the satisfaction of calling you anything but what you are."

"And what am I?" Will asks.

"Not a human," Hannibal says, and shrugs. "But not a beast, either. That implies wildness, unevolved thinking. I believe you are in total control and awareness of what you do." He pauses. "Of what you want."

"And what is it you think I want?"

"Well, you asked for words, did you not?"

Will hums, lips pressed together, and turns his eyes to the ocean again. He shivers, and Hannibal is too aware of his state of undress, the pebbling of his flesh and the sharp flex of his ribs, the jut of his hipbones.

"You will feast to your heart's content, in the arena," Hannibal tells him.

Will huffs. "In a month," he replies, eyes rolling.

"I'm led to believe there are other ways to sate you," Hannibal says idly, head tilted as Will blinks. His eyes darken, grow sharp, and flash in Hannibal's direction. "Am I wrong?"

"No," Will says, slowly. "But not from someone unwilling."

"Oh, so Cordell offered his heart willingly?"

Will laughs. "Cordell was a brute," he replies sharply, teeth bared. Hannibal does not disagree. Will sighs, lowering his knee, and pets over his stomach. "I would ask you for such things, if you were willing."

"You wish to take my heart?"

Will looks at him, eyes dark, raking Hannibal up and down. Despite his clothing, Hannibal feels naked under his gaze. Will looks ravenous.

"No," he says, very quietly, almost imperceptible beneath the rush of the ocean. The blood on his jaws is dry, but his mouth is wet, and he bites his lower lip. "Not your heart."

Hannibal tilts his head. "Do Hibernians often indulge in such perversion, as the Greeks do?"

"I don't know what that means," Will says, brow creasing.

Hannibal shakes his head. "It is no matter."

Will is silent.

Then, Hannibal says, "If you do not intend to kill me, or to eat me, how might I sate your hunger?"

Will's eyes flash, and fall to Hannibal's lap. That ravenous look has returned to his eyes. Hannibal smiles, and stands, and offers Will his hand. Will's touch burns him, blister-hot like a sunburn, and Hannibal takes him by the nape of his neck, fingers twisted in the rags around Will's hips. He directs him to the opposite side of the ludus, away from where the men sleep, towards the medical area which is empty now.

Will gasps as Hannibal flattens him to a wall, tilts his head up and to one side, showing the bloodied, graceful arch of his neck. He whines, pawing at Hannibal's robes, seeking to part them. His lips are open, showing the slip of his tongue, the shine of red teeth.

Hannibal growls, hunger rising up in his stomach that has nothing to do with food. He tugs on Will's nape, wishes his hair was long once again. He will make it so, reject it when Doctore orders it cut again. The people will want to see a wildling, he will say, not some broken Roman dog.

Will meets his eyes, and Hannibal flattens his thumb to the corner of his mouth, watches as Will arches to him, using his warm skin and spread thighs to entice. His heart beats strongly, loud as the clash of steel, and he slowly turns his head, nuzzles Hannibal's wrist until Hannibal softens his touch, and then he falls to his knees.

"Are you willing?" he asks, hands spread on Hannibal's strong thighs, wide and warm through his robes.

Hannibal snarls, and says, "Yes."

Will smiles, grateful and wide, and parts Hannibal's robes, pushes them to the side to reveal his cock. His eyes drop to it, wide and hunger, and he spreads his lips, ducks his head and sucks the head of Hannibal's cock into his mouth, takes him deep in one motion. Hannibal growls, tries not to think of how many men have fed him in this way. It's a possessive, all-consuming feeling, having Will use his mouth like the finest house slave. He wants to wrap his fingers in Will's hair, wants to fuck forward and use Will's tender throat.

He does, one forearm flat on the wall, the other cupping Will's head to hold him still as he works his cock in, feels it harden and fill Will until Will chokes, throat fluttering in spasm around his cockhead. Hannibal has not had the pleasure of a warm body for many years, and his gut clenches with pleasure, and he stifles a groan against his knuckles as Will moans, eyes closing, hands flat and not controlling on his thighs.

Will turns his head, sucks him down, tongues the underside of his cock with harsh licks. Hannibal holds him still, pulls back and fucks into him, as deep as he can go, relishing how Will chokes and moans around his cock. He does it again, seeking friction in the roof of Will's mouth, seeking the tightness of his throat. He takes, nothing in him but the animal drive to fuck and spill his seed, to fill Will and sate his hunger.

Will's hands, callused and rough and so warm, tighten on him, one sliding between his legs to cup his balls, and Will groans at their heaviness, tightens his lips and jaw and works himself back and forth on Hannibal's cock. It's like Will's hunger fills him, penetrates him, and Hannibal is helpless. If this is enchantment, if this is magic, Hannibal is eager to see himself lost to it.

His jaw tightens and he grunts, fucking in one more time before he feels his release clenching in him, arousal spiraling out, and he comes heavily over Will's tongue and down his throat. Will swallows eagerly, whining in relief as Hannibal clenches his fingers, forces Will to stay still as he ruts his cockhead over Will's slick tongue, dragging out the pleasure for himself.

When he's done, he pulls back, and Will's eyes are wet, his mouth is wet. He wipes his lips and corrects Hannibal's robes, and Hannibal hauls him to his feet, sees Will's eyes shining and wide.

His voice, thick with gratitude, when he says; "Thank you, Hannibal."

Hannibal trembles at the sound of it. He pets over Will's face, thumb to his lip, and Will's mouth parts, chin tilted up. Hannibal's hand slides to his neck, pressing there, covering his racing heart.

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

"Always," Will replies, voice rough with abuse. His fingers curl in Hannibal's robes, seeking his heat, his strength. Hannibal can feel Will's arousal, feel the hard length of it straining and rutting against his thigh. Will sucks in a breath, eyes heavy-lidded, and offers a smile. Hannibal smells sweat, blood, arousal – the sticky heat of his own seed on Will's tongue.

Will licks his lips, lets out a purr, and leans in, touching his teeth to Hannibal's jaw. "But I must earn my meal like the rest of us, hmm?"

Hannibal laughs, and pulls back, correcting his belt. Will shivers in the sudden presence of the cold, but his cheeks are flushed and his eyes shine.

"You speak the truth," he replies. "But if you train, and work hard, and do our master proud, I will see you well-fed."

Will nods, and sucks in a breath. Runs his hand over his head, nails digging into his scalp.

"Your will, my hands," he breathes.

Hannibal smiles.

Chapter End Notes

This is the song I imagined Will singing.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FkiHtTO-mk

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

We get some more smut, more bloodshed, and some bonding moments! Yay!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On his way to the ludus, Hannibal passes by one of the open seating areas where Margot will often lounge with Alana, discussing whatever it is women talk about when there are no men around. He hears Mason's raucous laughter, and looks up just in time to see Praetor Dimmond and the lady Bedelia as well, a table of grapes, figs, and honeyed ham splayed out in front of them.

"Hannibal!" Praetor Dimmond says, raising his glass in greeting. "Please, won't you join us?"

Hannibal cannot politely refuse, but he stops, and gives them a smile.

"I am wanted down in the ludus," he tells the man. "Dogs will not train themselves."

"Nonsense," Bedelia says, her pale brows arched and haughty. "Come. Sit with us."

Hannibal sighs inwardly, and gives her a gracious nod, and enters the sitting area. There is a fine couch, padded and painted a pale sky blue, on which Margot sits, Alana standing behind her, ready to serve. He sits at Margot's side, and Alana hands him a goblet of sweet wine. He gives her a smile and a nod of thanks, which she returns.

"I have heard some strange things, down in the markets," Bedelia says, and looks to Mason. "Apparently you are in dire need of a champion."

Mason colors, and gives a hum. "Oh?" he asks, his knuckles white around his goblet.

"Fallen at the hands of a Hibernian," Bedelia adds with a nod. Her smile is faint, and reminds Hannibal of the charming statues and paintings of the muses. He can smell, on her, the musky oils Romans use when a woman is not wet enough to have sex with. It stings his nose and he breathes deeply of his glass of sweet wine, and takes a sip.

Anthony smiles, just as haughty as his bedfellow. "Perhaps that is a testament to the stature of those we call 'Champions'," he says. Hannibal can feel the tension in the room thicken, see Mason's eyes flash with indignation and his cheeks color further, until he resembles the flags used to tease raging bulls.

"Or," Margot says lightly, as easy and fair as she always is. She puts a hand on Hannibal's arm, "Perhaps it is merely an indication of the fine training our friend here possesses, and

wields with such skill." She smiles at Hannibal, and nods. "The Hibernian is under Hannibal's express tutelage."

"Is that so?" Anthony asks, looking impressed. Mason settles, and grins over at Hannibal.

"I only train the finest with the finest," he says airily, taking a drink of his wine. He's clearly had more than one glass already; his speech is slurring. "Cordell was a sad loss, but if any savage dog under my friend's command can overcome a seasoned warrior, I am a very lucky man!"

"I would like to see this Hibernian," Bedelia says. There is a strange light in her eyes, and Hannibal swallows. He does not like the idea of her gaze settling on Will – it is no secret she has a preference for pretty boys. And Will is beautiful by nature, enchanting and enticing.

Mason's eyes are glowing, similarly predatory. "What do you think, my old friend?" he asks. "Would this Hibernian make a good show for our guests?"

"I'm sure you would not find his equal," Hannibal replies coolly. He takes another drink to wash down the bitterness in his mouth. The hour is just past sunrise, and the men will have begun their training already under Jack. He can hear, if he listens closely, the grunts and snarls of savage men, the heavy thump of wood striking wood coming from the ludus below.

Anthony lets out a crow of delight, sitting more upright. "I feel I must insist," he says. "If only to secure peaceful thoughts when talks of patronage come about."

Mason smiles, very wide. He looks at Hannibal. "You heard the man," he says, and gestures with his goblet, wine splashing down his fingers and wrist. "Go prepare your savage, Hannibal. We shall give the good Praetor a sight to behold!"

Hannibal nods, and stands.

"If I may," Anthony says, holding up a hand. "Perhaps we might make this a true test."

Hannibal pauses. He hands his cup back to Alana, who takes it with a tense smile.

"Have him battle one of my guards," Anthony says, splaying his hands out in an open, friendly gesture. He smiles at Mason. "Should the dog win, I will wholeheartedly give my support to this ludus, and to you, Mason."

Hannibal is tense, watching Mason as he considers. But the light in his eyes shows his decision has already been made. He meets Hannibal's eyes, and grins, challenging. "You heard the man," he says. "We shall have them fight at midday."

Hannibal fights the urge to growl, swallowing back his anger. Will has not been with them scarcely two weeks, and Mason wants to battle him against a seasoned, armed soldier? It's madness – Will hasn't even received the brand marking him a true gladiator.

But he cannot refuse. He nods.

"Dominus," he says, and nods to Anthony. "Praetor."

He leaves, his stomach clenching with uneasiness. Will has proven himself a capable fighter, but Hannibal has not had the chance to see him properly fed in several days. He hurries to the ludus, unlocks the gate and locks it behind him.

He goes out to the battleground, sees Will sparring bare-handed with one of his brethren who was bought in the same lot. The man is more slender than Will, younger, with dark hair and wild eyes. He's from the Rhine, if Hannibal remembers correctly.

He watches as Will kicks him behind the knee, sending him onto his back, winding him. He watches as Will catches his wrists, presses them down on either side of his head. Will's eyes burn, shine, as he bares his teeth and snarls, lowering his mouth to the man's neck. The man's eyes go wide, the scent of his fear explodes in the air.

Hannibal stands, and watches.

"I yield," the man says, kicking futilely at the sand. "I yield! Please!"

Hannibal sees Jack's attention caught, sees his eyes widen and his expression turn thunderous. Sees him ready his whip.

Will snarls, and pushes himself to his feet, wiping his hands over his head. His hair has grown, gotten long enough to *almost* tug, yet still short-cropped. He paces away from his victim, growling under his breath, and then he turns, and his eyes find Hannibal's, and lock.

He shows his teeth.

The man scurries to his feet, breathing hard, wide-eyed and shaking with fear. Will rolls his shoulders, clears his throat, and looks at the man. Smiles at him. "You have the heart of a beast," he says, and Hannibal frowns – he is speaking in the language of the Rhine. Hannibal knows the language, sparsely, and wonders if Will learned it during his time on the ship. "But you do not have the strength of one. Ask Doctore to give you the mast, and strengthen your shoulders."

The man nods, trembling, and worries his lower lip, wrings his hands together.

"Randall," Will says, and the man's – Randall's – eyes snap to him. "I will not spare your neck a second time."

Randall nods, frantically, and hurries between Will and Hannibal, his head ducked low. Will watches him go, fingers twitching. He looks ravenous.

Then, his eyes meet Hannibal's, and he tilts his head. "Are we to train?" he asks, switching back to the common tongue, his accent heavy and making the words somewhat clunky. Hannibal smiles at him, and jerks his head, telling Will to approach.

Will obeys, sighing in relief from the presence of the shade on his sunburned skin. He rolls his shoulders again and wets his lips, and fixes Hannibal with dark eyes.

"The Praetor wishes to see you fight," Hannibal tells him.

Will's eyes flash, and his chin lifts.

"Will this see me to the arena?" he asks.

Hannibal tilts his head. "It will improve your chances greatly," he replies. "If you do well, I'm sure Praetor Dimmond will lend his patronage and it will encourage Mason to put you on display."

Will frowns, and Hannibal is sure there are some words he does not know. But he sighs, and nods. "Then I will do it," he murmurs, and Hannibal huffs a laugh, wondering how Will can think it's a matter of choice. But, perhaps, to a creature such a Will, he only submits to the whims of men when it suits him. It's an intriguing thought.

"Who will I be fighting?" Will asks, lifting his eyes again. "You?"

Hannibal shakes his head. "One of the Praetor's guards," he replies.

Will frowns again, licks his lips. He shivers, his fingers flexing by his side, and Hannibal's fingers curl in answer, wanting so badly to reach out and touch Will. The memory of Will's mouth, the sweet heat of him, has consumed his thoughts since Will last went to his knees.

"Hannibal," Will breathes, and looks at him again. "I'm –. I'm so *hungry*."

Hannibal nods. He suspected as much. "What will fill you most?" he asks.

Will swallows, and rakes his eyes down Hannibal's body. "Let me kneel for you again," he says.

Hannibal lifts his eyes, sees that no one is looking at them. Doctore's focus is on the seasoned warriors – they specialize in weapons of their own, but it is good to cross-train for the arena, and currently two *murmillos* are training with the longer tridents and nets of the *retiarii.*

He cups Will's neck and pulls him towards the barracks. The serving boy is inside, wiping at Cordell's blood-stained cell floor. Days of cleaning and there is still red on the walls. Hannibal fixes him with a look and the boy scrambles to his feet, wide-eyed.

"Leave us," he says, and the boy nods, running out of the cell. Hannibal closes the door, though it will afford little privacy should someone wander, as the door is an iron grate, and can even fit a hand through the holes.

He pulls Will to the closest corner, where most vision will be lost unless someone decides to really look. Will shivers, arching to him, clinging at Hannibal's thighs over his robes.

"I've heard Romans have potions," he says. "Makes a man able to last through many rounds."

Hannibal snarls, turning Will and pressing him flat against the wall. "And how many men would satisfy you?"

"There is no number," Will replies, earnest and wide-eyed. He wants to kneel, Hannibal can see it in the tremble of his hands, the way his thighs are spread out, wanting, so warm.

Hannibal wishes he had oil to hand, so he might pierce Will there, take everything he has to offer. Wonders if it would even sate Will's hunger, or simply make him more ravenous, empty like a woman, eager for more.

Will whines, shows his neck and trembles when Hannibal puts his teeth there. "*Please*," he whispers.

Hannibal pulls back, cupping Will's head. He rests their foreheads together, his eyes on Will's lovely, pink mouth. Wants to touch his own there, wants to feel Will's need, to taste his hunger. Will licks his lips, wet and open, and Hannibal pulls back and allows him to sink to his knees.

Will pushes his robes apart, baring his cock, already hard and eager for Will's mouth. Will tilts his head, breathes in deeply, his eyes falling closed as he parts his jaws and sucks Hannibal down. Hannibal growls, cupping his face immediately, fucking in until Will's throat spasms and he chokes around Hannibal's cockhead.

"Have you been letting any other men sate your hunger?" he asks.

Will turns his head, flashes his eyes up. He gives a soft, needy moan, and shakes his head, once, just a little, unwilling to part from Hannibal long enough to reply with words. Hannibal cannot deny the visceral, low knot of pleasure he feels, knowing Will has starved himself, has resisted feeding, because Hannibal is not here to provide him sustenance.

"Good," Hannibal says, lowly. He presses a forearm to the wall, fucks until Will's head rests against it as well, simply taking, letting himself be used. "If I find out you've been lying to me, I'll kill you myself."

Will whines, but cannot speak, cannot even look at him. Hannibal uses his mouth roughly, until Will's lips turn red, bruise under the abuse. He cradles Will's aching jaw, presses his thumb to his stubble-rough cheek so he can feel the slide of his cock in and out of Will's mouth, feel how it catches on his teeth, feel Will's throat spasm instinctively when he presses deep.

He does, again, snarling against his fist as he comes. Will whines, pawing at his thighs, urging him closer until Will's nose is buried in the hair around the base of his cock. Will sucks on him, tonguing the slit when Hannibal pulls back enough to spill over his tongue, and he moans when Hannibal pulls out, lips wet, a single string of saliva connecting his tongue to Hannibal's cockhead, before Will licks his lips, and it breaks.

He looks up, breathing hard, and wipes the back of his hand over his mouth. He stands, but Hannibal doesn't pull back to give him room – it forces Will's head close to his, their cheeks touching, then their noses, and then Hannibal cannot resist. He kisses Will, hand on his neck tight to stop him pulling away.

Will stiffens, and makes a weak noise, but parts his lips and lets Hannibal taste him, taste his seed and Will's mouth, drinking the excess saliva there. It only makes him more thirsty, and he breaks one kiss, starts another. Will clings to him, nails in Hannibal's shoulders, arching closer as Hannibal ruts between his thighs.

When they pull apart, Will's eyes are wide. He's gasping, and touches trembling fingers to his sore mouth, then to Hannibal's. Hannibal pulls his arm from the wall, cradles Will's hand tightly, feels his warmth, the calluses there from many hours, long days, wielding a sword.

He kisses Will's knuckles and Will sucks in a breath, his fingers curling.

"You -." He stops, clears his throat, drops his eyes. "You shouldn't have done that."

"Why not?" Hannibal asks, tilting his head.

"It's -." Will swallows again, pulls his hand free and touches his lips. Shivers, eyes going heavy-lidded. "A kiss, it's…" He grunts, brows furrowing, and shakes his head. "I don't know the word. *Ceangailteach*."

Hannibal frowns, and brushes his thumb at the corner of Will's mouth. "Will it harm you?" he asks.

Will huffs a laugh, smiles, and shakes his head. Strength is returning to him now, his hands are no longer shaking, and his breathing is steadier. He looks contented, like a man just given a hearty meal, and he sighs, turns his head and nuzzles Hannibal's palm.

Hannibal draws back, knowing they are tempting the fates to remain here too long. "Are you hungry, Will?" he asks, correcting his robes.

Will nods, lets out a soft whine. "Always," he replies, and shakes his head. "Always."

Hannibal smiles. "When you kill this man," he says, opening the gate to Cordell's cell and leading the way through it, "I will have the body taken to the medical wing, and we will feed you with it."

Will nods, smiling in equal parts gratitude and eagerness. Hannibal takes two wooden swords from the pile in the corner of the training ground, and tosses one to Will. Will catches it, and slides into a ready stance.

Hannibal doesn't wait – he lunges, and Will ducks down, parries and dances away. He's smiling. "I imagine this fight will have real steel," he says. Hannibal nods, and Will brings his sword down, aiming for Hannibal's neck. Hannibal matches it, parries, and the swords slide down until they catch on each other's cross-guard, though they are not as wide as the Westerners use. Will grins at him, eyes dipping to Hannibal's mouth, and Hannibal gasps, able to feel something like heat, like touch, as though Will is pressing his hand to Hannibal's chest. He shoves him back, swiping in a wide arc, and Will laughs, bright-eyed and beautiful, and moves into another ready stance.

"It will," Hannibal replies, grunting with effort as he swings his sword to Will's exposed flank, catches the tip and leaves a red line there. It will not draw blood, but splinters, and Will flinches, knocking his sword into the blade to stop it going further. Hannibal side-steps him, and thinks that this is less like fighting and more like a dance. Will moves for him, moves around him, as fluid as water. He takes blows, gives a few of his own, but ultimately they move together as if in a show, something carefully choreographed, down to the last detail; the

sweat-damp gleam of Will's skin, the redness of his neck, the flex of his ever-strengthening muscles.

Then, Hannibal stops, as he catches sight of Mason coming onto the balcony. He shoots Will a look and Will freezes immediately, straightening up. His eyes flash, his upper lip curls in a brief snarl, and Hannibal stands at attention as Doctore yells out;

"Gladiators! Attend your master!"

At Mason's left side is Margot and Alana. On his right, the Praetor Dimmond, with Bedelia making up the rest of the line. Her eyes find Hannibal immediately and then, through association, slide to Will. She smiles, off-kilter, faint, and yet her eyes are very fierce on Will, raking over him as though he is a particularly fine cut of meat.

Hannibal hears Will snarl, though when he looks at Will, he sees his expression is not one of rage. Rather, Will is smooth as marble, unyielding as the sea, and he meets and holds the lady Bedelia's eyes.

Perhaps he can smell her, too.

"My mighty titans!" Mason calls out, as the rest of the gladiators form two rows and stand at attention. Some of them are bloody, some of them bruised – all of them look up at Mason like he might be Jupiter himself. "We have a very special treat for you today. The Praetor Dimmond has graciously volunteered one of his own personal guard to spar, so that this ludus might see some fine sport!"

The gladiators cheer. Will stands tall, unmoving as stone. He hasn't stopped staring at the balcony, though now his eyes are on Anthony. His lip twitches.

Hannibal's attention is drawn as the gates to the ludus open, and through them steps a large, imposing man. He is dressed in armor, the red and gold of Rome, and carries two wickedly-gleaming gladii. The serving boy runs up to him and the man hands him one, and he takes it, and brings it to Will, wide-eyed.

Will smiles at him, and takes the gladius from him, handing Hannibal his wooden sword. Hannibal swallows, and stands back as the gladiators form a ring around Will and the guard. He's tall, taller than Will by a head, broad in the chest, and Hannibal watches as he takes his helmet off and tosses it to one side before he shifts into a ready stance.

Will tilts his head, and Hannibal watches him, something hard and worried in his chest. It's been a long time since he watched a fight with anything other than disappointment or admiration, depending on the skill of the fighters – and, more and more, has found his reaction to it to be much the former than the latter. But Will makes him feel concern. Will makes him worried – not just for the fact that, should Will fall, the future of the ludus and his own way of life will come under serious threat, but for the fact that he is *Will*, and Hannibal doesn't want to see him die.

Mason laughs, loudly. "What do you say, Praetor?" he asks, grinning wolfishly at Anthony. "Shall it be to the death?"

Anthony regards him, brows raised at Mason's not-quite-hostile tone. "If you wish to lose another man, then let it be so," he replies coolly. Mason claps his hands together, smiling, and looks at Hannibal. Hannibal forces himself to nod, to appear self-assured, and assured in Will's abilities. He is a good fighter, and recently fed, so there is no reason to expect him not to fight at his prime.

Only, his best might not be the best of Anthony's man.

Mason holds his hands out, silencing the whispers, stilling the fighters. Hannibal can see the other men's eyes skating nervously between the guard and Will. They of course know by now, all of them, what Will might do when faced with such a grand meal. They know, and they are afraid – but some, he sees, are hopeful. Hopeful that Anthony's man might rid them of the demon that sleeps in their cells and sings his magic songs to the sea.

Hannibal makes note of those, just in case.

"Praetor, if you would do the honors," Mason says.

Anthony grins. "Begin!"

The fight is…embarrassingly short. It is all Hannibal can do not to laugh as, in utter silence, he watches Will slam his sword through the guard's neck, severing his head from shoulders in a series of short, jerking cuts. He's snarling, caked in blood. The guard managed to get a single blow in, one sweep at Will's flank that did not cut deep.

Will had taken the sword in hand, blood welling up around his fingers, jerked it forward so the man overcompensated in his lunge, and it had exposed his neck to Will's teeth. Will's sharp, savage teeth, his mouth that is so gentle on Hannibal – sunk deep into the man's throat, ripped a huge chunk of it out in one bite. Then, gurgling, the man had fallen to his knees and Will had struck the killing blows.

The chill in the air could have made Pluto himself shiver, as Will crouches over the dead man's torso, tugging at his armor with low, savage snarls.

Hannibal steps forward, and the gladiators part for him, and he fists a hand in Will's hair, hauls him upright. Will snarls at him, snaps at him, but quiets when he sees it's Hannibal. His eyes flash, recognition dimming the wild, feral light in his eyes, and he clears his throat, licks at his own hand, and stands at Hannibal's side.

Hannibal lets him go, smiles, and leans in close. "Very well done, Will."

Anthony's expression is not angry – no, it is altogether too shocked, too troubled to be such a thing. All five on the balcony are staring at Will like he might have sprouted horns and wings.

Then, Bedelia clears her throat, and takes a drink of wine, looking like she has no care in the world. "A fine kill," she says. "Though I would train your dog on the virtues of good showmanship."

It breaks the spell. Mason laughs, and claps a hand on Anthony's shoulder. "Well said, my lady!" he crows. "Come, let us eat, and talk, for now blood of your house has been spilled here, and that makes us brothers!"

Anthony nods, lips pursed as he gives Will one more careful once-over. Will meets his eyes, and grins, showing bloody teeth.

He waves, and Anthony shivers, turning away.

"Margot, lend your girl to cleaning Will up, would you?" Mason calls over his shoulder. "And see to it he is properly fed and housed. Tomorrow, he will earn the brand and take his place amongst the titans in the arena!"

"Your will, my hands," Margot says, her face pale but her smile wide. She nods to Alana, and they both leave the balcony. In the moments that pass, Jack calls the gladiators back to attention and they resume their training, and Will's eyes drop to the dead man, ravenous and dark.

Hannibal pets through his blood-soaked hair, and smiles. "We will keep his meat," he tells Will. "It is as dominus commands."

Will smiles.

Hannibal calls some of the trainees over. Among them is Randall, who looks at Will like he is a demon of vengeance and flame. "Take this corpse, strip him of everything of worth and burn the clothes. All the meat, you will cut and salt, and store the organs where they will not spoil, so that Will may eat them."

They nod, looking a spectrum between sickened and resigned, and haul the body away. The stain of blood is large beneath where the man lay, and Will sighs, idly brushing his fingers over his jaw and licking them clean.

Alana emerges in the shadows of the ludus, a small pile of clothes, a bucket of water, and a sponge in her hands. She smiles and waves at Will, and Will's eyes grow soft and fond. He smiles back at her, and he and Hannibal join her in Cordell's cell.

She sets the bucket down and looks to Will, gives him a sharp command in his native tongue. Will blinks at her, tilts his head, but shrugs, and pushes the bunch of rags to his ankles and steps out of them, revealing all of his flesh to Hannibal's greedy eyes. The line where his skin has been covered is stark, the rest of him very pale as Hibernians are. There is a dark patch of hair around the base of his cock, which Hannibal thinks Bedelia would be very eager to see.

Will meets his eyes, gives him an impish grin.

Alana is blushing, but wets the sponge and starts to wipe Will down, starting at his shoulders. Will sighs, undoubtedly pleased to be relieved of the cling of mud, blood, and sand on his sweaty skin. He touches Alana's wrist as she circles him and gives her a soft smile, and a word that Hannibal suspects means 'Thank you'.

Hannibal straightens, and tilts his head. "Alana," he says, and she looks to him, but does not pause in her work. As she gets lower, her touches turn lingering, soft hands brushing over Will's shoulders, down his back. Nails working at pieces of stuck skin, of scabs. Will bears it all gracefully, neither flinching nor reacting with pleasure to her touch. His eyes are on Hannibal.

"Yes?" she asks, when Hannibal goes a long time without saying anything.

He clears his throat, shifts his weight. "I was hoping you might act as translator," he tells her, and meets Will's eyes meaningfully. "I know you are a trusted friend, and anything told to you will be kept in confidence."

Alana straightens, frowning between them both. She wrings the sponge into the bucket of water and rinses it again, returning to Will's side and dabbing at the cut he received during his fight. Will hisses, swallowing, but she merely grins at him, swatting at his shoulder, and says something that makes Will roll his eyes.

Hannibal tilts his head, and Will smirks at him. "She told me to stop being a baby," he says.

Hannibal laughs.

"Well, what would you like me to translate?" Alana asks. She crouches at Will's feet, washing his legs quickly and carefully. She seems intent on avoiding looking at his cock, which Hannibal finds both amusing and pleasing. He meant what he said – if Will chooses to sate his hunger with anyone else, may all the gods in all religions help them. And that includes Alana, until Hannibal decides otherwise.

"I have taken it upon myself to make sure Will stays well-fed," he tells her, as she rises and finishes cleaning him. She plops the sponge back in the bucket and unfolds the roll of cloth and hands it to Will. It's a long tunic, and a belt. Will blinks at her, and puts it on, huffing in discomfort at the cling of stiff clothes to his wet skin.

He ties the belt around his waist and gives another huff, and Alana rolls her eyes. "Man up," she teases. Will rolls his eyes at her and drags his rags back up to his hips, under the tunic.

Then, she turns to Hannibal, and folds her arms across her chest. "Alright, so you're making sure he gets food," she says. Then, she blinks, and her eyes widen, and dart between the two of them. "Wait, like…like *that* way?"

Hannibal sighs, and nods. "I've found it to be the most sustainable."

Alana blushes, covering her mouth. "Hannibal, I didn't even know you enjoyed the company of men."

"It is a mutually beneficial arrangement, let's leave it at that," Hannibal replies with a dismissive wave of his hand. Sexuality is altogether too fluid, and far too open in Roman and Greek culture, for him to dissect it now. Yes, he has never sought a man to sate his need for pleasure and a warm body, but Will is here, and he's attractive, and Hannibal is perfectly satisfied with what they have done so far.

"But there is something else," Hannibal adds, and looks at Will, tilting his head so Will knows he should fill in the blanks now.

Will nods, licks his lips, and touches Alana's shoulder, drawing her attention. He speaks lowly, that lilting language that reminds Hannibal of his song. The language is like a constant stream, uninterrupted by harsh consonants or heavy words. It flows as water, and Alana is nodding along, and then Will repeats that word – 'Ceangailteach' – and her eyes widen.

"Oh," she says. "I see."

"What does it mean?" Hannibal asks.

"The, ah, the best translation is 'binding'," Alana tells him. "A kiss is a contract between creatures of the other world, and -." She stops, hesitating, and looks to Will. Says something, soft and quick. Will huffs a laugh, and shakes his head. She smiles, looking relieved. "You have made a contract with him, to be his source of food, no matter what."

Hannibal tilts his head, considering that. Well, it's as much as he promised to do anyway. "And if I cannot feed him?" he asks.

Alana presses her lips together, and shrugs one shoulder. "Then he will eat you, and the contract will be over."

She says it so casually, Hannibal cannot help but laugh. Will grins at him, eyes flashing with mirth, like Hannibal finally gets the joke he's been trying to tell.

"Well, at this ludus, and in the arena, I'm sure there will be no shortage of sustenance," he says.

Will smiles, soft with something akin to adoration. He gives a quiet, pleased sound that feels like gratitude, and his fingers curl as though he wants to reach out to Hannibal. Alana hums, rubbing her hand over her mouth, and then goes to her bucket and gathers it in her arms.

"I should go," Alana says. "Mason ordered this to be Will's cell, now."

Hannibal nods, and Will turns, eyeing the walls. He looks neither pleased nor disappointed at this development. Alana gives them both another smile, and then takes her leave, and Hannibal prowls closer.

He takes Will by the hips and rests his chin on Will's shoulder, chest to his back, breathing in the scent of him – even with the bath, Will smells like salt, like the sea air, like something crisp Hannibal would use to season meat. Will turns his head, shivering, until Hannibal's lips touch his cheek.

"Tomorrow, Mason will brand you," Hannibal says. "With the Verger seal."

Will nods. He turns, his eyes falling to Hannibal's brand, which is old and faded. The dip of the M and the tip of the V merge together, making the crest appear as iron fencing. He drags his fingertips across it, and then lifts his eyes.

"Then, the arena," he says.

Hannibal nods.

Will smiles, and leans in, and Hannibal allows their lips to touch, closes his eyes and cups Will at the nape, holding him close. Will trembles for him, shivering, and clings to his robes. He parts his lips, allows Hannibal's tongue between them, turning the kiss messy and passionate and Hannibal's stomach clenches, his body is warm, and he can taste blood in Will's mouth.

Will growls, pulls back, his eyes dropping. Then, back up, ravenous and dark.

"Are you willing?" he asks.

Hannibal smiles, and pushes Will to his knees. "Yes."

Chapter End Notes

so I'm no way saying this will go one way or the other, but if some Will/Alana stuff happened, what would you all think of that? Just so I know as I'm writing the story.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> thanks to everyone who let me know their Will/Alana opinions: I should have been more specific. If it happens it would be the scenario like in the show were gladiators are basically made to have sex with house slaves while people watch and Alana would end up being chosen for Will (I actually had a whole scene in mind for this so it's definitely a Certain Scenario and not just random if it happens) and Hannibal, knowing this, wouldn't punish either of them for it. But we'll see what happens - if I do go that way I'll warn y'all before the chapter.
>
> Anyway, Will earns the brand! Enjoy :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will is singing when Hannibal comes to him again. He has, in his hands, a large roll of coarse cloth in which is wrapped slices of what he assumes used to be Anthony's guard's thigh. Or maybe it is more pieces of Cordell. Perhaps his ribs; it had been hard to get a good look at him before Will so brutally slaughtered him, and as a result, Hannibal cannot guess which section of him would have rendered this particular ratio of meat to fat.

He ordered it be kept uncooked, and since it is fresh, the slices are thick and leaking through the cloth onto his fingers. He needs to figure out, eventually, how to feed Will meat in a sustainable way. If salting or cooking it ruins it for him, or if he would require more of it if that's all that was available. If he can survive off bread like mortal men should meat run scarce.

Will stops in his song – this one sounds distinctly happier, though he sings it slowly to match the rush and roll of the waves – and he looks up and smiles at Hannibal, his nostrils flaring as Hannibal takes his seat on the edge of the cliffs and hands him his meal.

It is just past sunrise, and the pink-orange of the morning sky colors Will pale and rosy. He makes Hannibal think of wildflowers and blossoming berry trees. The wind presses with gentle, probing fingers to Will's face and his torso, pressing the tunic Alana gave him flat to his muscled chest.

Will sets the offering down, unwrapping it and giving a gentle hum of pleasure when he sees what's inside. He picks up one strip, tips his head back and holds it above his mouth like one might dangle a mouse above a snake. He catches one end between his teeth and pulls it in, hand dropping, neither chewing nor actively swallowing, it looks like, but then the meat is gone, and he reaches for another.

"You'll have to forgive the taste," Hannibal says after a while, as Will steadily consumes the meat. "The salt helps the meat keep for longer."

Will shrugs one shoulder. "I have tasted worse," he replies, and offers Hannibal a fond smile. "And eating for pleasure, being selective with how I am fed, is something other men do. Not I."

Hannibal returns his smile, and gathers the cloth, tucking it into his belt when Will finishes the last of the meat. He looks back out at the sea, pleased in the wake of Will's companionable silence. It is not often Hannibal has found himself in company of a man who is equally happy to simply sit, and watch. Mason, of course, is a raucous and overzealous conversationalist, eager to simply hear himself speak as he is to listen to advice or discuss training routines. Margot, sweet thing though she is, has learned that silence often means her brother is in a foul mood, and associates the quietness of men with danger.

Alana, he could speak with all day, but Will is different. Other, in essence, simply by existing.

"Were you singing another ocean song?" Hannibal asks.

Will smiles, and shakes his head. "That was a song between a mother and son," he tells Hannibal. "The son is inviting his family to join him at the river, where they might dance and play, and the mother wants to join them but must stay home and keep the hearth. In the end, she lets her son go, and they dance without her."

Hannibal tilts his head, noting the soft, forlorn tone Will's voice has taken. He looks to the other man. "Did you have a family, Will?" he asks. "Have you ever met any creature like you?"

Will sighs, teeth pressed into his lower lip, and shakes his head. He brings his heels up to the edge of the cliffs and rests his forearms atop his knees, his chin on those. Hannibal resists the urge to touch him, to test the strength of his back and shoulders, to run his nails through Will's short-cropped hair. He is sure he will not be able to resist, once Will's hair is long again.

"Things like me are cursed," Will replies. "And they die, when they can no longer drink from their mother's breast. Either they starve, or they are killed." He sighs again and looks at Hannibal out of the corner of his eye. "My mother was a…" He frowns. "I don't know the word. She spoke to gods."

"A priestess?" Hannibal suggests. "Or an oracle, perhaps. Did they grant her visions?"

"Visions?" Will repeats.

"Could she see the future?"

"Oh." Will shakes his head. "No. But she understood magic, and taught me before her death. I was taken in by my father's tribe, where most of the women were like her, and I was taken care of." He sucks in a breath, swallowing harshly. "They said it was good fortune, and would win favor with gods, to show a creature like me kindness."

Hannibal hums, unable to stop himself smiling. Again, the thought that Will may have ended up here by choice crosses his mind, and he thinks of Gideon – Gideon is a squirrelly, fox-like man. Hannibal cannot imagine he overcame Will by force.

"How did you come here, Will?" Hannibal whispers. "What happened?"

Will turns his head and rests his cheek on his forearm. He smiles. "Will you tell me your story, if I tell you mine?"

Hannibal smiles, and loses the fight with his self-restraint, lifting one hand to gently brush his knuckles down the outside of Will's calf. "I will," he replies.

Will shivers, his eyes flashing, fingers curling into loose fists. He bites his lower lip again, raking Hannibal up and down with a dark-eyed gaze, and then turns his focus to the ocean again. He breathes in the salt air, and licks his chapped lips, and sets his chin on his arms again.

"There was a famine," he murmurs. "The crops died, and the animals followed soon after. Then what little still remained was taken by people who were just as hungry but a little more willing to kill for it." His lips twitch, almost a smile. "For a while I fed well. They kept me alive because I could consume the dead, and fight those who tried to take from us. But then my tribe began to fall. One by one, lost to hunger and cold as we tried to find more food. Nothing came."

There are tears in his eyes, a deep ache in his voice Hannibal longs to soothe. He is familiar with the feeling of that kind of loss, to see those you love wither away and perish. To feel like it's a personal failure.

"I went to the sea," Will continues. "I found travelers there, people who were strong and healthy, who had been blessed with rich harvest from the ocean. I lived with them, for a time, before the slave ships came."

Hannibal swallows, sure he knows the ending to this story. But then;

"I heard that, in the land of the Romans, there was plenty of food," Will says. "That there were places where men were allowed to kill for sport. And I heard, in the mines, that slaves were simply left where they died. I was sure I would have been able to eat well, here."

Hannibal's eyes widen. "You boarded Gideon's ship willingly?" he asks.

Will huffs a laugh, sheepish, and rubs one hand over the back of his sunburned neck. "Yes," he replies. Hannibal is sure his shock is clear on his face, for when Will looks at him, he smiles, and flushes. "I wanted to come here. I was starving, and I thought such a mighty land would have many things to feed me."

His lashes lower, and he leans in, nudging Hannibal's shoulder with his nose. "Was I wrong?"

"I confess, you are not wrong," Hannibal replies, unable to stop himself gently touching Will's offered jaw. "But to willingly give yourself to the life of a slave, to this ludus, is

nothing short of madness."

Will laughs, his smile wide, dimpling his cheeks, and he leans into Hannibal's touch. "Then I suppose I am mad," he says plainly, with another laugh and a shrug. "And I wanted to help."

"To help?" Hannibal repeats.

Will hums. "My land was rich with water," he says, and Hannibal nods, recalling what he has heard of Hibernia, that it is a country lush with grass and rivers. "If what my mother, and my tribe, believed was true, then my presence here might please your gods as well as mine own, and bring rain."

Hannibal laughs, unable to stop himself. "Do you believe you can cure the drought?" he asks.

"It is not a question of belief," Will replies. "The rain will come, or it will not. The gods will be satisfied, or they will not, but the arena is where we shall place our offering." He turns away and Hannibal's hand drops, settles by his hip. "There is magic here. I feel it, in the blood, in the sand. The earth is dry, and I feel her aching."

He looks down, and unfolds his arms, dragging his nails through the sand below them. He gathers a handful, and lets it scatter, lets the wind take it from his fingers and fall to the cliffs.

Then, he sighs. "And you, Hannibal? How did you come to this place?"

Hannibal swallows, and looks away. "Our stories share similar origin," he replies. "And yet, I cannot say the tragedy spurned my actions, so much as began the process." Will tilts his head, frowning his way. "There was a similar famine in my country, and to ensure my family was well-fed, I joined the military. I was captured after a defeat at the hands of the Romans, and brought here. Mason bought me."

"Is your family still living?" Will asks.

Hannibal shakes his head. "No," he replies. "My mother, father, and sister were all slaughtered, like pigs. After the Romans had their way with them."

Will lets out a low, angry noise. "You must hate them," he says, and Hannibal nods again, pressing his lips together. "Why, then, do you remain here? Are you not free?"

Hannibal huffs a laugh. "I am," he replies. "But I have friends here, now. And food. You know better than most it can be hard to come by." Will nods. "And there is an old saying; "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer"."

Will gives a soft, understanding hum. He leans in. "Revenge cannot be served here," he says.

Hannibal smiles, brows rising, and looks at him.

"Do you not wish to strike at the heart of Rome?" Will asks.

Hannibal tilts his head.

Will sighs, and looks behind them. The men are stirring, readying themselves for the day's training. Yet neither he nor Hannibal move to join them. "There is heart, here," Will murmurs. "I hear the men talking. Some of them wish for their freedom. Most of them well-trained. If there are many other places like this one, Rome sits upon a host of warriors both fierce and dedicated, with no fear of death."

"You talk of an uprising," Hannibal says, equally-low.

"Hatred is powerful," Will replies, and looks to him. "I do not know the ways of Rome, but I know the will of the gods. This is punishment, for the sin of pride."

"A sin you would see punished further."

Will smiles, and pushes himself to his feet. He holds out a hand for Hannibal and helps him rise. "Thank you for the food," he murmurs, and lets Hannibal's arm go. Where he touched, Hannibal is warm.

Hannibal nods. "You must tell me what would feed you best," he replies, rubbing absently where Will touched him. "To keep the meat fresh, it must be cooled and stored. Or cooked. Would that still service?"

Will blanches, and shakes his head. "Cooking meat ruins it," he replies softly, his nose wrinkled in distaste. Hannibal figured as much. "There must still be life, and blood, within it. Otherwise it is like eating sand."

"Then tell me, Will; I know you're still hungry."

Will sighs, and looks Hannibal up and down again, then away. He nods, and rubs the back of his neck, and drags his nails up through his hair.

"I can bring you more, if you need it."

Will presses his lips together, and his eyes fall to Hannibal's arm. "I am to receive the brand today," he says, and Hannibal blinks, but nods, accepting the abrupt change in subject. Around them, the grunts and groans of fighting men start, as they take up their mast pieces and their swords and pair off, beginning basic training until Doctore arrives.

"Yes," Hannibal replies, and looks down at his faded scar. He smiles. "Count yourself fortunate; Mason used to brand his warriors on the back, with the entire Verger seal."

Will's eyes flash. "Do you wear such a mark?"

Hannibal nods.

Will's head tilts. "May I see it?"

Hannibal looks to the fighting men, and nods again. He goes to Will's cell and Will follows, closing the door behind them. Hannibal shrugs off the halves of his robe at the shoulders, letting his belt keep the clothing at his waist, and Will circles him, turning to see the old, white scar that was the first mark Mason gave him.

Will gasps, and then growls, and Hannibal closes his eyes when he feels Will's warm fingers touch the bottom edge of the scar. "This is barbaric," he murmurs. His touch falls away, and Hannibal corrects his clothes, and turns to meet Will's dark eyes. Will licks his lips, and swallows, and looks down. "I find myself…angry, with each new thing I learn about my new master."

Hannibal smiles. "It's a natural emotion," he replies. "And one Mason is quite adept at conjuring."

"Why have you not ended his miserable life?" Will hisses.

"There is a law, here," Hannibal says. "If a slave raises a hand to his master, all of them will be put down in answer. Even if I were to succeed, I would place the life of every house slave and every gladiator at the mercy of Rome. And I would not see Margot come to harm, nor Alana, for the sake of revenge."

Will's head tilts, considering.

He steps closer, until Hannibal is able to count the different shades of blue in his eyes, and touches Hannibal's chest with something like reverence. "When that changes," he says, very quietly, and Hannibal shivers and cups Will's wrist. "Consider me your servant."

Hannibal frowns. He wants to question the inevitability of 'When'. But instead, he says; "You do not serve me, Will. From what I understand, you are the master between us."

Will huffs, and smiles, and slides ever-closer. Their noses touch and Will's exhale is sharp with meat. "I would rather call you my friend," he replies. Hannibal smiles, unable to resist the urge to cup Will's jaw. "But perhaps I used the wrong word; whatever you command of me, I will do, because I understand your cause, and believe it to be right."

"There is no cause," Hannibal says, harsh and low. "And you must be careful what you say to the men, here. I cannot side with you, should word of uprising reach Mason's ears."

Will laughs, and pulls back. "Uprising?" he repeats, his voice a tease. "I don't know what you're talking about, Hannibal."

Hannibal smiles, and rolls his eyes. He lifts his head, tilting when he hears Jack's voice ring out over the ludus. "We should go," he says, and Will nods, following him back out of his cell. Within the training ground, there is an iron pot holding hot coals. Out of it juts a bar of iron – one Hannibal knows well. Within it, buried in the coals and growing hot, is the Verger mark.

"My titans!" Mason's voice cuts through the relative silence, and the gladiators form two lines. Will is on the end of the front one and Hannibal stands by Jack, to one side. Mason and Anthony are on the balcony, the women absent, a single slave holding a jug of wine at Mason's side to be sure neither of their cups run empty. "I have wonderful news! The generous Praetor has agreed to lend this mighty ludus his patronage!"

The gladiators cheer, a chorus of whoops and hollers growing deafening. Mason's smile is wide, cat-like when having just eaten a bird, and Anthony, while more sober, seems similarly pleased. Mason claps him heavily on the back.

"We will see your support well-deserved, my friend," Mason says. "Now, where is my newest dog?"

Will lifts his chin when Mason's eyes land on him. Mason smiles, widely, and makes a gesture for Will to step forward. He does, and kneels, as Jack takes hold of the iron with a gloved hand and pulls the cherry-red tip from the coals. It steams in the sea air, and Will looks to it, his jaw clenching, his eyes bright.

"Will," Mason says, and Will looks at him as Jack approaches. "Today, you earn the Verger brand, as well as the honor and glory of the rank of gladiator. You will fight in the arena under my name, and bring this ludus the rightful glory it deserves!"

The gladiators cheer again. Hannibal notes that even those who looked hopeful Will would fall to Anthony's man seem eager, and pleased. Whether they wish to see Will suffer – or are even curious if he can – remains to be seen, but it pleases him to know Will has at least garnered favor amongst his comrades. Outside of the arena, the bond between fighting brothers is unbreakable and strong, for they all suffer and fight for their master, and it reminds him a lot of the brotherhood in a battlefield.

Jack stands in front of Will and Will looks up at him, and extends his arm for the brand. Jack nods, pressing his lips together, and turns it, shoving the seal with a grunt against Will's flesh. Will stiffens, hissing in displeasure, and bares his teeth, fingers forming a tight fist. Hannibal swallows at the scent of burning flesh, too-familiar.

Then, Jack pulls the brand away and places it back in the pot, and Will's arm now bears the sharp, angular M-V seal, his flesh black and red and blistering. He lowers his arm, sweat shining on his skin, and raises his eyes to Mason.

Mason's smile has grown wolfish, and even Anthony's expression betrays a certain satisfaction at seeing Will in pain. "Your first battle is in three days," Mason says, and looks to Hannibal. "See him well-prepared."

Hannibal nods. "Your will, my hands, dominus," he replies, and Mason nods. He wraps an arm around Anthony's shoulders and herds him back inside.

Hannibal approaches Will as Jack calls for the pot to be taken away and the gladiators to pair up again, and helps him to his feet. Will looks down at his arm – the brand was placed on the innards of his forearm, just past the elbow, on his non-dominant side so that he can still swing a sword.

Will meets his eyes, and growls. "Barbaric," he spits.

"Will?"

Will turns, and Randall appears at his shoulder, wide-eyed. He's holding a wet cloth in his hand and Hannibal recognizes the scent of the salve they use to treat burn wounds; cloying and floral. Randall hands it to Hannibal and retreats quickly, and Hannibal smiles, turns it inward, and wraps it around Will's brand.

"You're one of us, now, Will," he says. Will's jaw clenches, his fingers flexing in pain as Hannibal binds the cloth tightly. "Congratulations."

Will manages a weak smile. Hannibal knows the look on his face; the pain is excruciating, and it is instinct to want to retreat, to find a haven within oneself so that you don't feel it. Hannibal touches his shoulder and Will's eyes sharpen.

"I'm afraid there's no time for recovery," Hannibal says. Will straightens, and follows him towards the pile of wooden swords. "If Mason wants to see you in the arena within three days, I must make you as prepared as possible."

"I understand," Will replies, and takes a sword in hand, following to a small open space beside the cliffs. He moves into a ready stance, grimacing when he tries to hold his sword with both hands, and his arm protests, his fingers don't want to curl. Hannibal remembers, though it happened many years ago. The wounds, sometimes, still feel fresh.

Hannibal smiles at him, and allows him time to settle and force his aching hand to obey his wishes. "If you prove yourself, Mason will shower you with no end of pleasures," he says. Will blinks, sucks in a breath, and lunges. He's slow, in too much pain, and Hannibal deflects his sword and kicks Will away. "You'll earn a salary, and better meat." Will's eyes flash, and he darts out of the way as Hannibal swings for his head, ducking and catching the tip of his sword at Hannibal's thigh. Again, they dance. "Women, if you want them."

Will snarls. "I have you for that," he says, low enough not to be overheard by others, just Hannibal. He darts forward, draws his blade up Hannibal's flank and digs the tip of it under Hannibal's arm, where the blood rushes and Hannibal knows a man could bleed out in seconds, if cut. Will's eyes are bright, with lingering pain, with anger.

He smiles, and shoves Will back, swinging his sword in a wide arc to gain distance. "I know," he purrs. "But it will be offered."

"Then I'll eat them," Will replies. "Heart first."

Hannibal laughs, and wonders, in a metaphorical sense, if this is how Will consumes all of his food; heart first. Hannibal's certainly rushes heavy for him, and catches when worried, when lust overtakes him. Will spins his sword in his hand, presses the edge of it against his forearm, and presses close again, lifting it to Hannibal's neck in a threat of a cut. Though the swords are wood, Will's splinters and digs into Hannibal's clothing in sharp pinpricks.

Will smiles at him, baring his teeth, and tilts his head. "You like that idea."

"I find the thought of you well-fed pleasurable," Hannibal replies.

Will huffs, and rolls his eyes, but steps away to begin the next round. Hannibal shakes off his distraction, and tries to ignore the shine of Will's sweat on his neck, the flush on his face. He will feed Will again, tonight, he decides. When everyone else is asleep. In any measure and any way Will allows it.

Will looks him over, like he can read Hannibal's thoughts. He smiles, and spins his sword back into a proper hold, and lunges again.

Chapter End Notes

The song I imagined Will singing is basically "Mother" by Coco and the Butterfields (which is a band I love and you should check them out). The song is originally very upbeat so just imagine Will singing it slower, a little sadder, and of course, in Gaelic :D

Chapter 6

Hannibal slips through the gate in silence, locking it behind him and letting the key hang from his belt. He eyes the guards at the main gate, finds them looking his way, but only briefly. He's a known face here, and moves freely between the grounds and the rooms as if he were master of the house.

Will is not on the cliffs. Hannibal feels a strange absence in his chest, robbed of Will's soft voice calling to the sea.

He goes to the cells and enters Will's. The man is not asleep, but sitting on his bed, knees pulled up, staring at the opposite wall. His head tilts at Hannibal's entrance, and he smiles, eyes crinkling at the corners. He shifts his weight, sliding closer to the back wall, giving Hannibal room to join him on the bed.

Hannibal goes, sighing as his aching muscles shift and settle on the thin pad that makes up the bed. It is much like his own, but Cordell's weight has caused it to dip in the middle, making his hips and back strain uncomfortably as he fights to remain upright.

Will, it seems, has no such qualms. He leans into Hannibal's weight, cheek on his shoulder, and turns to him, knees over Hannibal's thigh, one hand resting on his chest as though to feel his heartbeat. Hannibal shivers, for though Will knows him carnally now, this feels more intimate, more than fighting and sex. Will warms him, chases away the chill of the sea air which, even here, invades and whitens their skin.

"Will," he murmurs, and Will lifts his head, eyes bright. "How long can you go without food?"

Will blinks, once, slowly, and sighs. "The longest I went was five days," he says. Hannibal nods, filing away that information. "I can't remember the last time I was full."

Hannibal frowns at that. He shifts his weight as Will straightens beside him, resting his cheek on Hannibal's shoulder again, one of his legs wrapping around Hannibal's. His feet are cold and Hannibal gives a soft huff of protest, shifting his legs until his robes cover his skin and protect him from Will's cold toes.

"I need to know what will sustain you best, and for longest," Hannibal says. Will hums. "Alana told me it is whatever gives life, that will sate your hunger. Meat, sex, blood." Will nods, slowly, and Hannibal smiles, for Will seems nervous, almost – boyish and shy, as he buries his face in Hannibal's shoulder. "Surely you have a preference."

Will presses his lips together, and swallows. "Yes," he replies. His hand slides along Hannibal's chest, dipping under his robes, and while his feet are cold, his hands are warm, so very warm, callused and strong as his nails drag idle through the hair on Hannibal's chest.

He smiles when Will doesn't speak further. "Will you tell me?"

Will pushes himself up, leveraged against Hannibal's chest, and meets his eyes. In the light of the lanterns outside, he shines like something otherworldly, his eyes almost entirely black. He pushes himself upright, thighs parting to settle across Hannibal's, and he breathes in deeply, nostrils flaring as Hannibal straightens up so he's leaning more fully against the wall.

"It is blood," Will whispers, flattening his hands with utmost gentleness between the halves of Hannibal's robes, pushing them apart to bare more skin. He leans down, breathing heavily, and touches his teeth to Hannibal's jaw. He licks, snarling, and Hannibal grabs his hips, digging in with harsh nails as Will begins to roll on top of him, grinding against Hannibal's cock through their clothes. "And you. You fill me like nothing else could."

Hannibal shivers, closing his eyes as Will's lips part, plant warm and wet on his neck. He remembers telling Will not to expose his neck so much, and yet here he is, no better, eagerly baring his pulse to a monster. Will's exhale is warm, his hands are warm, resting over Hannibal's heart.

"Hannibal," he breathes, and lifts his head so he can meet Hannibal's eyes. His own are glazed, his cheeks the same pink as rare meat, and he rolls his hips again, gasping when Hannibal's thickening erection grinds against his own. "I need you to fill me."

He says it weakly, wanting, sweat shining on his neck, dampening his hair. He is beautiful, utterly beautiful, and Hannibal sucks in a breath, growls when Will lifts his hands, pulls his tunic over his head and bares himself to Hannibal, only the rags around his hips remaining.

He takes one of Hannibal's hands, lifts it, kisses open-mouthed and wet at the meat of his thumb. His teeth graze, still coated in red from his food that day, and the slit of his black eyes makes Hannibal think of demons and the underworld, of Will, dragging him along and Hannibal eagerly following.

"Are you willing?" Will breathes, his other hand dragging down Hannibal's heaving chest, to the new 'V' created by his robes where the belt holds them in place. He presses his touch there, rolls his hips, as inviting and seductive as any slave Hannibal has seen. His eyes, when Hannibal meets them, have turned wide and desperate. "Please say you are."

Hannibal sucks in a breath, grabs Will by the back of his neck and yanks him closer, until their chests collide and he can feel Will's erection rutting against his stomach. "Please," Will gasps, touching his forehead to Hannibal's, a soft, hungry noise spilling from his throat. "I know I'm not a woman, but I can – I can make it good."

Hannibal growls, suddenly viscerally outraged at Will's behavior. He pushes Will away and rolls him, forcing him onto his back. Will gasps, a flicker of apprehension in his eyes as Hannibal prowls over him, catches his wrists and pins them with one hand above his head. Will jerks under him, tries to fight, but his branded arm is still weak and Hannibal has the advantage of his weight.

He tilts his head, leans down, and cups Will's face with his free hand, pulling him up into a kiss. Will parts for him eagerly, chest heaving, thighs going lax and spreading for Hannibal as Hannibal licks into his sweet mouth, tastes meat and salt on his tongue. Will's moan is soft,

without breath or volume, and when the kiss ends, Hannibal meets his eyes, and sees them dark again, desperate.

"Do you think I care that you are male?" Hannibal demands, for he knows what the Romans think of such things, but the Greeks are entirely different. Still further separated, he's sure, from Hibernian culture. He wonders if it is such a grievous thing, to find attraction to one's own sex, to admire the strength of a man's shoulders, the bulge of his thighs, to covet his large hands and want to slip into the secret space between his thighs.

Will swallows, looks up at him with wide eyes, face dark with shadows. He turns his gaze away, exposing his throat, and Hannibal growls and grabs his chin, forcing their eyes to meet again.

"What did I tell you about baring your neck?" he says.

Will trembles, and swallows again, licking his dry, cracking lips. His voice, when he speaks, is heavy with resignation. "I don't know if you care," he whispers, and Hannibal tilts his head, releasing his chin. He smooths his thumb over the red imprint he left behind and lets out a quiet sound of apology. Will's fingers curl, and he releases his wrists there, too, petting down his flanks instead.

Will pushes himself upright, clinging to Hannibal's arms. He licks his lips, showing Hannibal the slip of his tongue, and asks again; "Are you willing?"

"Are you?" Hannibal replies. "Or are you just hungry?"

Will flinches, biting his lower lip, and lets out a soft snarl. He releases Hannibal, pulling back, wincing when he puts weight on his injured arm. He pushes his hand against the bandage, glaring down at his lap, then somewhere in the vicinity of Hannibal's knee, pointedly ignoring the bulge of his half-hard cock.

"I'm always hungry," he says, bitter and sharp. "But I'm not always willing."

Hannibal sighs, rubbing his hand over his mouth, and settles beside Will. His robes still hang, held up by his belt and the bend of his elbows, and he pulls his arms free, letting the top halves fall. Will watches him do it, his jaw tight and clenched, fingers curling as he rests the backs of his hands on his thighs, knees drawn up.

Finally, Hannibal sighs again, and turns to face him. "I apologize," he says. Will blinks, head tilting. "I have behaved boorishly."

Will's brow creases. "What is that word?"

"Like an ass," Hannibal says.

Will laughs, and Hannibal is warm for the sound of it. He reaches out and takes Will's hand, their fingers lacing and curling tight. Will trembles, pressing his thighs together, and bites his lower lip. "You are an ass," he says, and Hannibal huffs, rolling his eyes.

"Forgive me," Hannibal says, brushing his thumb along the back of Will's knuckles. He sees, between his third and fourth, a small welt where a splinter caught and was dug out. He sighs, easing along the edge of it with gentle touches. "What you said made me angry."

"How so?" Will asks.

"Sex is meant to be pleasurable, Will," Hannibal says, his eyes still on their folded hands. "And I have been selfish in our liaisons so far. It occurs to me you believe the reason for that is because I don't want to touch you in that way."

Will hums, tilting his head. It shows Hannibal his neck again – that maddening, enticing arch of skin just begging for someone to mark it. He is watching Hannibal's fingers as well, eyes near glowing in the lantern light.

"And that is…not the case?" he asks.

Hannibal shakes his head, and finally raises his hand, separating from Will's so he can cup Will's jaw and turn his head, so their eyes can meet. "Not at all," he replies, and his head tilts, and he smiles. "I thought creatures like you were made to ensnare the hearts of men."

Will hums. "It is true, we often appear as what men find most attractive," he says, his eyes flashing with mirth. "A male is rare."

"Yet here you are," Hannibal purrs.

"Here I am," Will replies, breathless now.

"So what does that tell you, Will?"

Will's lashes lower, a coy, wide smile spreading out on his face. He hums, and Hannibal pulls him forward, his hand spreading out on Will's jaw, wide and warm. Will kisses him, fists wrapped in Hannibal's belt, tugging, until he moves, mounting Hannibal's thighs again. He shivers, growling against Hannibal's lips, a soft, pleased sigh escaping him when he finds Hannibal still eager, flesh hard and hot beneath his clothes.

"It'll feel so good," Will breathes, claiming Hannibal for another kiss, another, and Hannibal's hands fall to his bared thighs, feels him thick with muscle, yet so unbearably soft as well. Will makes him think of fresh meat and lakebeds, of dewy mountain grass and sweet perfume. He is wildness, the vast expanse of everything, and yet here, in Hannibal's arms, he trembles.

Hannibal grabs him, surges up and lays him out on the bed. Will sighs, smiling faintly, and Hannibal kisses him, digs his nails into the rags around Will's hips and pushes them down, baring his cock and the pale flesh where the sun has not touched.

Will shivers beneath him, biting his lower lip, and growls when Hannibal wraps a hand around his cock. He's wet, here, leaking at the tip, and Hannibal wants to taste it, see if he's as sweet here as everywhere else.

"Have you ever let a man do this before?" he asks.

Will whimpers, shaking his head, stomach sinking in and hands flexing on Hannibal's shoulders when Hannibal strokes him again, thumbing at the head of his cock. His flesh is a dark red, the same red as his mouth, and Hannibal growls at the admission.

He leans down, kisses Will's neck since Will seems to eager to offer it to him, and snarls; "Because you aren't a woman?"

"Because I didn't want them to," Will admits. "I want you to."

Hannibal closes his eyes, and cannot resist parting his jaws, biting down on Will's exposed throat. Will flinches, hissing in pain, dragging his nails up Hannibal's exposed back, catching on the brand along his spine.

"Please," he whispers. "Please, fill me."

Hannibal pulls back, untying his belt and tossing it to one side. His robes fall, eagerly parted, so he's as naked as Will. Will licks his lips, eyes raking ravenously over Hannibal's body. He rears up, catches Hannibal's nape and pulls him into a kiss and Hannibal growls, lunging for him, pinning him down again. Will is strong, of course he's strong, but his surrender makes him feel meek, pliant and willing under Hannibal's weight.

Hannibal fumbles blindly for his belt, unwilling to part from Will's flesh for too long, and finds what he's looking for – a small pouch, next to the key, in which there is a little dollop of the same salve Roman women use when their bodies are too dry for their husband's pleasure. The scent of it is thick, cloying and floral, and he wrinkles his nose but takes the pouch, opening it, and spreads some on his fingers.

Will watches him, breath hitching when Hannibal pushes his thighs apart. He swallows, asks, tentatively; "Will it hurt?"

"At first, perhaps," Hannibal replies. "There is little men do to each other that doesn't hurt. But that is not my intention."

Will nods. He doesn't seem nervous, he is not some blushing bride on her wedding night or skittish filly of a slave set loose in the whorehouses for the first time. Hannibal wraps his slick fingers around his cock, jaw clenching in anticipation, and pushes between Will's thighs. He spreads what remains on Will's hole, finds the flesh tight and dry, and pushes in with one finger.

Will moans, eyes closing, head tipped back against the bed, clawing frantically at Hannibal's shoulders. "*Fuck*," he growls, the flush on his cheeks staining his neck now, reddening his chest. His cock twitches and Hannibal gathers the slick on his other hand, raises it to his lips to taste. It's sharp, bitter, and he hums curiously and wonders if he tastes the same.

He pushes in further, crooks his finger up, and Will gasps, arching, stomach tight. "Please," he growls, and Hannibal thinks this is like offering a starving man a glimpse of food, but telling him he cannot touch, cannot eat. It seems cruel to make Will wait longer, so he pulls his fingers out, digs his nails into Will's strong thighs, and pushes in with his cock instead.

Will lets out a sharp cry of pain, bucking against him, but it only makes Hannibal sink deeper. He snarls, for Will is so tight around him, hot as the sun, suffocating Hannibal's cock as he sheathes himself in Will. He prowls over Will, digs his nails into Will's nape and holds him still as Will snaps his jaws, clutches at his back, his thighs clinging to Hannibal's hips. Hannibal pushes his legs up, forces Will to bend, to take him all the way.

Will utters some dark, ragged thing, that might be a curse, might be a cry to his own gods. He rakes his nails along Hannibal's shoulders, nostrils flared, showing teeth and Hannibal kisses him, kisses him and fucks him because it feels too good to stop. He can see why the Greeks do this; the tight cling of Will's body around him is incredible. He burns as the sun god's chariot, a beast of fire and water, and sweats and shakes beneath Hannibal's weight.

The bed creaks, and Will pushes one arm above his head, muscles flexed and tense as he braces himself, wraps his legs high on Hannibal's back, below his arms. Hannibal feels in him a tug, a pull he associates only with Will, and perhaps this is his magic, this incensing fire, urging Hannibal to fuck him, to mount him, to fill him to bursting. Will snarls, red, black-eyed, and grabs Hannibal's hair, pulling him into a kiss.

It's a savage thing, having Will like this. Hannibal knows, like compass directions and the tides of the sea, that he will kill any other man who tries to touch Will in this way. He will wet the sand with Roman blood, tear them apart if they dare to lay a hand on Will.

"Please," Will says, ragged, wanting. His free hand seems incapable of finding a good place – he touches Hannibal's hair, his neck, his shoulder. His heaving flank, his hammering pulse.

"Does it hurt?" Hannibal breathes. For surely, it must – Hannibal's own desire feels like pain. His orgasm bites at the back of his neck, urging him onward. He is a beast, and would run himself ragged for the chance to mount Will like this. He will, every single damn day. He meets Will's eyes, sees that desire reflected back, sees Will's hunger.

"Yes," Will replies. "It hurts, it -." His hand finally finds his place, on Hannibal's hip, thumb dug tight around the bone, fingers splayed out wide on his sweating skin. Hannibal growls, presses deep, rolling his hips tight to Will's flesh, and Will gasps, his eyes widening, flashing a color Hannibal has never seen – his irises are golden, glowing. It's a beautiful color, alluring as treasure buried at sea, and Will trembles, gasping again as Hannibal fucks in and finds that spot that makes him go tense all over. "*Hannibal*."

Hannibal growls, rearing up, his hands pressed flat on Will's thighs to keep him spread out as he keeps moving. Will groans, wrapping his hand around his cock and stroking tightly as Hannibal's jaw clenches. He tips his head up, a rough sound of pleasure escaping him when Will bears down, so fucking tight around his cock.

"Please, Hannibal," Will begs, weakly, forgoing his brace on the wall and pawing at Hannibal's chest. "Please. I need you."

His body clenches down, spasms, and Hannibal cannot hold back any longer. He prowls over Will, cups his nape and kisses him, a shudder running down his spine as his orgasm overwhelms him and he comes, spilling thick and hot into Will's body. Will lets out a soft,

high, satisfied noise, lashes fluttering and mouth slack as Hannibal fills him. He trembles, tightens, and comes a moment later, dirtying his stomach and his hand with his seed.

Hannibal forces his eyes open, his breathing heavy like he just sprinted from here to Rome. His cock twitches, spilling again, the pleasure does not wane as he's used to, but builds, and builds. He fucks in again, growling, as Will purrs and whines, gently petting his shaking shoulders. Again, again, Hannibal fills him, until his seed leaks out around his cock, staining their thighs. Will growls, licks Hannibal's sweaty, flushed neck, then brings his dirty hand to his mouth, sucking his fingers clean.

Hannibal can't take it anymore – he pulls out, sharply, hissing when the pleasure abruptly snaps and his head clears, and yet it feels like addiction. He is compelled to take Will again, to seek pleasure in his mouth or between his thighs. He ruts, unable to help himself, hissing as his spine grows molten, grows hot. He sinks back into Will, finds Will welcoming and warm, sore and swollen, and fucks in again, spilling one more time before finally, finally, it ebbs. Like tides from the shore.

Will is purring, a low rumble, his eyes no longer shining gold and Hannibal wonders if he imagined it. He thumbs Will's flushed cheek, feels the angle of his smile, the dimples at the corner of his mouth, and sighs, wondering, utterly amazed.

"It felt good, didn't it," Will says, and though it's a question he doesn't speak like it's a question. Hannibal nods, mutely, clinging to Will, hands spread out wide on his shivering flanks.

He kisses Will, tastes Will's seed on his tongue, and gasps when Will's body clenches around him, forcing his spent cock out. He pulls back, settling into place at Will's side, and Will hums, absently sliding his fingers through the mess he left on his stomach, bringing it to his bruised lips to devour. The dip of the mattress forces them close and Hannibal embraces him tightly.

"You are a divine creature, Will," he breathes.

Will huffs a small, pleased laugh, and rolls onto his side, pressing close to Hannibal's chest, and he's warm, so very warm, thrumming with life. Hannibal imagines he can see it, shining beneath Will's skin, the utterly satisfied tilt to his mouth making Hannibal flush all over again.

"I am just flesh and blood," he replies. "As you are."

"No," Hannibal says, shaking his head. "You are something entirely different."

Will hums, and lifts his chin, asking silently for a kiss Hannibal is eager to grant him. He licks into Will's mouth, tastes the salty sharpness of his release there, and cups his face when they part. His hand slides to Will's short-cropped hair and he sighs.

"If this satisfies you," he says, "I will give it to you every night."

Will smiles, wide. "Thank you," he murmurs, soft with joy, and kisses Hannibal again. "Thank you."

Three days pass, and then Will is due in the arena. Hannibal stands beside Mason and Anthony, in the Praetor's box. Bedelia is lounging in her seat, Margot beside her, both of them smiling and laughing as they talk about whatever it is women talk about to distract themselves from the bloody whims of men.

"Let's hope your dog is as good here as he was against my own man," Anthony says, a sharp, thin smile on his face.

Mason crows with laughter. "Gods willing!" he replies.

Hannibal smiles. He had come to Will that morning, fed him sweet meats and seen Will on his knees for him, eyes blazing with gold and Hannibal knows he hadn't imagined it, not this time. Will is a monster, a beast of blood and sweat, and he's ready. Hannibal knows he will fight fiercely, at the top of his strength. He imagines Will now, pacing restlessly within the holding chambers. Hannibal saw him put next to the butcher's room, where fallen gladiators are taken and their blood wets the ground. He wonders if Will is eating, picking absently at flesh not yet disposed of. If he will be full, and feral, and emerge with blood in his teeth and his eyes burning in the sun.

"The wait is over, my friend," Mason purrs to Hannibal, drawing his attention. Hannibal turns, breath catching, and leans on the edge of the balcony. His fingers curl as he sees Will, dressed in that same tunic, sandals on his feet, a short sword in his hand. He was given no armor, no other weapons.

His opponent is a man from the Rhine. Hannibal watches him emerge from the other side, the cheers of the crowd growing in volume and feral glee as the two men approach each other. He sees Will nod, then Will turns his head. He finds Hannibal, and smiles.

Hannibal returns it.

Anthony stands, holding his arms out to call for silence, and the arena grows dim and quiet in anticipation. "My dear friends!" he calls, voice echoing. "You have all no doubt heard of the fall of the mighty Cordell." A chorus of boos and cries answers his declaration and Anthony smiles, viciously pleased, and waits for it to die again. "We offer here, his killer! Will, this savage Hibernian beast, might win your favor, or see himself fall for your entertainment!"

Some of the crowd snarl at Will. Some of them cheer. Hannibal smiles.

"I will not keep you waiting a moment longer," Anthony declares. He looks down at Will, looks down at him and smiles, and Will lifts his chin again, and his eyes shine in the sunlight, bright as his sword. Anthony leans forward and, with a snarl, says; "Let the games begin!"

Chapter 7

The scent of blood and sweat is a pervasive one. It's one of those smells that can be, initially, ignored – for it seeps, prowls in the darkness, grows volume and mass until it's unignorable. Hannibal can smell when a woman is about to bleed for the month, for it builds up in her like overlaying perfume after perfume. He can smell sweat and sex on a man in the same way – perverse, he thinks, that Romans will not bathe between one sexual conquest and the next. They will smear their seed and sweat between one girl and another and another.

Blood seeps.

Until it doesn't. Once it's noticed, it cannot be ignored.

Will's shoulders are hunched, his teeth bared in a wicked snarl. The Rhine man has been using his sword and speed to keep him and Will as separate as possible – perhaps Will's reputation, his teeth, have preceded him, and the Rhine man knows that to let Will get that close is essentially suicide.

Nevertheless, Will is persistent, and determined. Hannibal's hands rest on the edge of the balcony, he forces his breathing to be soft and steady.

"Look at your man, Mason," Bedelia says, and Hannibal looks at her, finds her regarding Hannibal coolly, one eyebrow arched. "He looks two blows from stepping into the arena himself."

Hannibal's lips twitch, pleased that Bedelia is reading his worry as eagerness to join in the fight. "It's been many years since I saw the arena from that perspective," he says, nodding to where Will has ducked, pressed his blade flat to his forearm and swings like he's throwing a punch, aiming to cut wide and shallow. He's done that move to Hannibal multiple times, and Hannibal usually parries it by -.

The Rhine man catches Will's blade with his sword, but falls for the trap Hannibal has never succumbed to. He grabs Will by the neck and yanks him close, their foreheads almost knocking. Will grunts, his eyes flashing, the other man yanking on his shoulder to make him bare his throat, sure to try bringing his sword down on Will's exposed flesh.

Hannibal's fingers curl.

Will brings his knee up, sharply, aiming for the man's stomach. It lands and the man groans, doubling over. Hannibal leans in, tense in his spine, in his arms – Will could easily sever the man's head, now. He could end the fight.

Will doesn't.

He pulls back, breathing hard, kicks the man's shoulder until he sprawls onto his back, winded. Then, slowly, Will presses his foot over the man's sword-wielding arm like Hannibal

did for their first fight. The man growls, muscles in his sweat-damp arms bulging. He lunges, punching Will savagely in the thigh but Will doesn't flinch, barely stumbles.

Mason lets out a crow of delight, startling Hannibal as his hand comes down heavily on his back. "You let me know if you'd ever like to rejoin that sacred ground, my old friend!" he says brightly. "Perhaps fighting side by side with your trained dog. That would be a mighty sight if he proves half the champion you were!"

Hannibal hums, lifting his chin. "He has heart, certainly," he murmurs, his eyes back on Will as Will visciously twists his heel and the man cries out, his hand going limp. Will steps back and the Rhine man stumbles to his feet, his sword in his left hand. Hannibal smiles – Will forced him to switch to his non-dominant hand, and expose his other side in the process. Gladiators too-often become used to a certain way of moving, a certain skillset. Even something as simple as switching sword hands can throw off their entire rhythm.

The Rhine man snarls, running for Will, swipes his sword in a heavy-handed arc towards Will's head. Will ducks, skidding below his sword and turning on his knees. The sand breaks his skin, blood-wet and dirty, and he stands with red knees and bruised shoulders.

Bedelia lets out a hum and turns to Anthony. "At least he's learned the art of showmanship," she says, waving to the roaring, jeering crowd. Favor for and against Will seems to be swinging as rapidly as the sword blows, though there is a general consensus that Will is fast becoming the favorite, the more he dodges the Rhine man's blows and the bloodier and more breathless both men get.

Anthony huffs. "So it seems."

Hannibal blinks, and looks down at Will, and it occurs to them that…Will *is* performing. He's dancing, like he dances with Hannibal. He could have killed the man when a blow to his neck when the man was on his back. He could have lunged for him like he did Anthony's man – his neck is exposed, easy to get to. Even now, as Hannibal watches, Will could have struck a damning slice across the man's back before he turns and rushes Will again.

Hannibal smiles.

Will swipes his sword, forcing the Rhine man's down, and kicks him in the back to send him stumbling past Will. There's blood running from Will's shoulder, now, though whether that's a smear from the other man or a blow, Hannibal can't be sure – there is too much blood and sand caking them to tell.

Will pauses, and looks up at Hannibal.

He smiles.

Hannibal tilts his head, raises a brow. It was a fine show, but now it's time to finish the job.

Well?

Will's smile widens, showing all of his teeth, and he looks to his opponent. A strange change comes over his face – he is no longer outwardly angry, shows no aggression nor fear, but holds the cold, deadly assurance of an executioner. He spins his blade in his hand, his upper lip twitching, and advances on the Rhine man.

Above them, the sky darkens.

Hannibal looks up, blinking in surprise when he sees clouds spreading out, slowly, from the edges of the arena. Of course, an overcast day is not completely out of the norm, despite the dry aridness Rome has taken recently. But these clouds rumble, they snarl as hunting dogs called to heel by their master. The air feels prickly, tense, like the claws of a cat.

Margot, beside him, looks up as well. She blinks, her eyes widening, and sits up straighter, her gaze settling on Will.

The Rhine man seems to understand the difference in Will's demeanor as well – he no longer has a dance partner, but an enemy in his vision. He scrambles back, panting with fear, and swipes at Will with his sword – then with a fist when Will deflects that, takes the flat of the blade at his branded forearm and knocks it away.

Will catches his fist, twists it back sharply, and smiles. It's not a happy smile, not one of those gentle, sweet ones he gives Hannibal; not even one of the warm ones he sends to Randall or the other trainees when they stare at him, soaked with fear.

It is anticipatory.

Will lets go of the man's hand, kicks him in the chest, and holds the tip of his blade to the man's throat. The crowd erupts in a chorus of cheers and wild hollering, slamming their fists on the arena walls, desperate for blood.

Will looks up, nostrils flaring, eyes on the crowd. Then up, further.

Hannibal looks to Anthony. "Praetor," he whispers, and Anthony's gaze snaps to him. Will's eyes burn into them. "Does he live or die?"

Anthony clears his throat, his face pale as he stands. The crowds are shrieking now, no better than the demons and denizens of the underworld. Screaming "Kill him! Kill him!" and Hannibal shivers, growling softly under his breath. How many times had he heard similar calls, both for and against his own life? How many lives had he taken at their whim?

Anthony throws his arms out, calling a relative silence. "Shall the Rhine man live?" he calls. The crowd howls, thirsty for death, screaming for blood. Above them, the clouds rumble as if joining the chorus.

Hannibal is watching Will. Will has dragged the Rhine man to the middle of the arena, sword slicing shallowly into his neck to ensure compliance. He has the man on his knees, one hand in his thick hair, forcing his throat bare.

Then, he throws his sword down, before Anthony can decree the man's fate. Shocked, the crowd falls silent, and Anthony lowers his hands.

Will smiles at them, sharp and savage, before he bends down and, slowly, presses a kiss to the Rhine man's ear. He sucks in a ragged, slow breath, closes his eyes, and cups the man's head.

"My ladies," Hannibal says. "You may want to look away."

"What -?" Margot, suddenly, lets out a shriek of alarm as Will tilts his head, jerking the man's head to one side and sinking his teeth, wide, into his neck. She covers her face and turns away, curling up in her chair, and Will's snarl is loud, echoing in the stunned-silent air.

Blood wells up around his lips, cascading down the Rhine man's chest in a waterfall. His arms spasm, fingers twitching, his last gurgling breaths trembling, wide eyes blinking rapidly as Will snarls, clenches his jaw, and jerks his face away.

The man's blood fountains, a thin arc in time to his slowing pulse. His neck is ripped open, clean down to the white smudge of bone. Will's swallow is loud as he devours the man's flesh, leans down and bites again, this time on his shoulder, ripping a long strip of muscle clean away and swallowing it like a snake with a rat.

Hannibal feels, on his shoulder, a single drop of rain.

The clouds rumble, and the air grows thick. It seeps in, the sky darkening, shadows so sudden it makes Hannibal shiver with the chill. Another icy drop of rain falls, coloring the white balcony wall a darker grey. As Will consumes his kill and waters the arena sands with blood, so too do the skies break.

The Rhine man falls with one heavy slump, and Will's snarl is like that of a great beast. He takes his sword in hand, lifts it, and points it towards Anthony. He yells something, in his own language – Hannibal will have to ask him what it means later – but then the clouds swell, and burst, and a thick cloud of icy rain begins to pour down on them.

After a moment, the crowd cheers, standing as one and raising their fists, their faces, their open arms to the sky. Will lifts his chin, his eyes shining, water pouring down the sides of his face, cleansing the blood from his shoulders and neck, wetting his clothes to a fine, tight line against his body. Hannibal meets his eyes and Will smirks, wipes his wrist along his bloody mouth, and licks the skin clean.

Anthony clears his throat. "He brought the rains," he whispers.

Hannibal has to go to him.

He turns, passing Mason and Anthony in animated chatter, past Bedelia and Margot as they dare chance a look to the ruined mess Will left behind of his kill. He passes Romans, slaves, guards. He goes down to the cells, to the entry gate that is now open, allowing Will to pass between them.

Will spots him, and goes to him immediately, and Hannibal takes his hand, leading him towards one of the back entrances where slaves come and go, and the bodies are taken to be dismembered and disposed of. They are alone, and he cups Will's bloody face in his hands and presses him against a dark wall, where there is no lantern light.

Yet Will shines.

"You were magnificent," Hannibal breathes, kissing him. He kisses Will's red mouth, tastes blood and rainwater, and doesn't think he has suffered thirst this urgently in his entire life. "Will -."

Will hums, lifts his chin, and slides his hand around the back of Hannibal's neck, pulling him closer, into another kiss. His thighs part, trembling, and Hannibal touches them only to stop when Will lets out a hiss of pain.

He draws back, pushes Will's tunic up gently to expose the darkening bruise from the Rhine man's fist. He growls, flattening his hand there with utmost tenderness. Will purrs for him, eyes flashing a lovely golden color, and cups Hannibal's chin.

"Your gods were pleased with my offering, it seems," he murmurs.

Hannibal smiles. "Someone's gods were, yes." He tilts his head and pets Will's bloodied face. Will leans into it, affectionate as a loyal pet, his hands sliding around to Hannibal's waist and tugging him closer by his belt. "What did you say, to the Praetor, when the rain fell?"

Will laughs. "I asked him why he was not smiling," he replies. "The rain was falling, and yet he wore the same face as a landed fish."

Hannibal hums, leaning his forehead to Will's. "I'll confess, Will, despite all the legends and stories Romans tell, they are not often greeted with proof of the divine, of real, flesh-and-blood carnivores like you." Will huffs, and licks his lips, sliding his thumb across his jaw and licking it clean.

"Will they call me *belua*?" he asks. "A monster?"

"Possibly," Hannibal replies, brushing his knuckles down Will's cheek, then under his jaw to tilt his head up. "But you are the bringer of rain. Much praise and joy will fall upon the ludus, and with it, Mason's favor will flow to you, like a river down a mountain."

Will huffs a laugh. "I care not for his favor," he replies with a roll of his eyes.

Hannibal smiles, slides his hand with more obvious intent up Will's bruised thigh. Will shivers, his eyes flashing in the darkness, his hands fluttering to a gentle standstill on Hannibal's chest, like the last few beats of a man's heart.

"Hannibal," he breathes, leaning in. Blood is a rich flavor on his tongue, greedily tasted when Hannibal licks along his lower lip, kisses Will brazenly. Will moans, the sound weak and stifled as best he can, spreads his thighs further so Hannibal must press close, to keep him

upright. Will's hands slide to the small of his back, tightening in his clothes, bunching the excess of his robes.

Hannibal kisses him, roughly, his free hand gripping the nape of Will's neck in a strong hand. Will sags to him, gasping, his heart pounding and throat flexed harshly beneath Hannibal's grip.

"If you care not for the favor of your master," Hannibal whispers, his voice low, rough, pleased beyond measure to see Will's lashes flutter in response to it, his lips parting, chin rising to seek Hannibal's mouth. "What, my dear Will, do you care for?"

Will's eyes flash, slant away, and he licks his lips and tugs on Hannibal's belt, until Hannibal's body is bracketing him completely, shoving him against the rough wall. "Will you fill me again?" he whispers.

Hannibal tilts his head, thumbs gently at the corner of Will's mouth. "Are you hungry?" he asks, worried for a moment that Will's appetite may only grow if he's consistently given good food. Hannibal wonders if he's capable of getting fat and lazy like the high society of Rome, if his gluttony will turn to starvation when denied a meal for longer than a day. Will had said he had gone five before without food, but here he is now, asking for more, and Hannibal had fed him just this morning and he's consumed another offering of flesh mere minutes ago.

Will's lips twitch, his lashes low, smile fond. "No," he confesses, sighing. "I suppose I just… like it. It felt good when you mounted me." His head tilts. "Do ordinary men not eat for pleasure? And fuck for the sake of it?"

"Yes," Hannibal concedes, gently cupping Will's chin, lifting his eyes.

Will licks his lips, sounding unsure. "And it felt good, didn't it?" he asks, his voice turning abruptly weak, his hands lifting to flatten, red and damp with blood, over Hannibal's chest. Hannibal can only nod, for nothing had ever felt that good in his life. "I want to do it again."

Hannibal growls, forces himself to swallow, forces himself to remove his hand from Will's neck, from his sweet thighs. "Later," he promises, when Will lets out a weak, impatient growl. "Now is not the time, Will, not here. Mason will come for you if he does not wish to indulge in watching another fight, and if he is, I am duty-bound while outside the ludus to be at his side."

Will huffs, snaps his teeth and folds his arms over his chest. "You guard a rabid dog and his -. What is she? That woman?" He tilts his head. "His lover?"

"Margot?" Hannibal asks, and Will lifts one shoulder in a shrug. "The woman with dark hair is his sister."

"I've seen the way he looks at her," Will says, snarling. He gathers a mouthful of bloody saliva and spits it between their feet. "That is not brotherly love."

"Perhaps not," Hannibal replies, sighing internally. Though Will's anger, his wrath, is lovely to behold, Hannibal knows the danger of speaking too openly about the masters where others

might overhear. Indeed, there is a bustle coming, the next round of fighters called to action. Hannibal must go and attend Mason and Margot, and figure out what the rest of the day will hold.

He returns to Will, cradles his jaw and lifts his chin. Will meets his eyes, pressing his lips together, and drags his bruised knuckles along Hannibal's mouth, wiping away the traces of blood from their kiss. He sucks them clean, almost absently, though the sight causes Hannibal's stomach to tighten, impatience rising in him.

Will sighs, and turns his face away, gently pushing at Hannibal's chest. "Go," he says, soft and sweet. "Attend your master."

"Today was a wondrous day, Will," Hannibal replies, checking his robes to be sure he has not been unduly exposed by Will's wandering hands. There is a smear of blood from Will's touch on the front of his robe but he cannot do anything about that right now. "If Mason follows his normal ways, there will be a feast in your honor. Wine, and women."

Will huffs. "I don't want wine or women," he says, and eyes Hannibal, head tilted. "Will you visit me again?"

"Of course," Hannibal replies.

Will smiles. "I meant what I said," he murmurs, purring the words. "Being with you is… satisfying, yes, it curbs my hunger, but there is pleasure in it, too."

Hannibal smiles. "For me as well," he says, and Will's lips twitch, curling up. "I will not keep you waiting long, I promise."

Will nods, and Hannibal turns away. The air feels cold with the rain, with the absence of Will's flesh under his thighs. He pauses by the entrance to the stairs that lead up the main stalls of the arena. They are heavily guarded at the top, preventing gladiators and citizens from wandering and sharing space.

"Will," he says, and turns to see Will watching him. "What did you say to the Rhine man, before you killed him?"

Will smiles. "I told him to rejoice," he replies softly, and runs a hand over his head, through his short-cropped hair.

Hannibal considers this, and thinks of how Will had said, with assurance, that he might be able to cure the drought. Wonders if there is some power in Will, that truly feels the ache of the dry sands, the cry of the barren fields that thirst for water.

Above him, there is a cry; "Hail, Will! The devourer of man! The bringer of rains!"

"I think you will see rich rewards for this," he murmurs, absently.

Will smiles, wide and sweet. "Yes," he purrs. He prowls closer, lifts his chin to scent the rain-heavy hair. They stand, in a moment of silence, listening to it fall, and then Will's head tilts. "Do you feel it, Hannibal?"

"Feel what?" he asks, breathless.

Will hums, closing his eyes, and his smile is very wide, showing his teeth. "The magic," he whispers. "They say the gods are in the rain. And now they pour down their love and blessing upon us." He slides a hand, gently, up Hannibal's back, brings it to rest above the old scar of his brand. "We must see their blessing answered."

"How?" Hannibal says, turning to meet Will's eyes.

Will smiles again, the golden light flashing in his lovely, dark irises, and then he pulls away. "With blood," he replies. "A reckoning that will make Rome tremble."

Hannibal cannot help the way he shivers, from the base of his neck to his knees. "You have the eye of a man with great plans," he says.

Will huffs a laugh, and retreats to the shadows. "Go attend your master," he calls. "I'll see you later."

Chapter 8

The rain continues on, and on, well past midday and into the darkening hours of the evening. As host of the games, Anthony and Bedelia must remain for their entirety, and Hannibal swallows back an irritated huff as Mason chooses to remain as well.

But that irritation is soon replaced with surprised delight, when Mason turns to him and claps a hand on his shoulder. "My old friend, will you accompany Margot back to the house? Preparations must be made to celebrate this joyous occasion, and you know I could not bear to leave her alone."

"Of course, dominus," Hannibal replies with a nod of his head, as Margot appears at Mason's shoulder and gives Hannibal a strained smile. "I shall see her returned safely." Mason grins at him, and turns away. "Dominus," he adds, drawing his attention again. Though Hannibal does not, technically, need to refer to Mason as such any longer, he knows it softens the man greatly to hear it; "Shall I gather Will and bring him to the ludus?"

"Hmm? Oh." Mason gives a dismissive wave of his hand. "No, of course not. There is still sport in him yet, I imagine. Should the games grow tiring we shall return him to the arena. Perhaps Neptune will flood the whole region to the brim at the sight of him!"

Hannibal winces, sure that Mason means it as some odd sexual joke. He bows his head and turns away, and Margot leads them away from the balcony, down the stairs that join to the hallway where, if one goes right, they will emerge on the streets, and if one goes left, they will journey down to the guards and the barracks.

"Domina," Hannibal says.

Margot smiles at him and touches his shoulder. "Hannibal, please, do not be so formal with me," she says. Her eyes shine in the firelight, she is very young – Hannibal remembers, distantly, seeing her as barely a child, the same height as his hip, squealing and running from her brother as he chased her with a wooden sword. She has grown beautiful through the years, soft-cheeked and doe-eyed.

He remembers what Will said about how Mason looked at her, and he presses his lips together, turning his face away.

She smiles, tight-lipped and knowing, and tilts her head so Hannibal is forced to meet her eyes. "You have grown a fast friendship with Will, haven't you?" she asks, a single brow arched, and she gives a little rock of pleasure when Hannibal doesn't deny it, lifting to her toes, then back to her heels. "I could tell. You look at him the way my father looked at my mother."

Hannibal frowns, for Molson Verger was a man neither kind nor loyal to his late wife. "I would disagree," he replies. "My…. I do not find comfort in being compared to your father and mother, when it comes to me and Will."

Margot hums. Her other brow joins the first, and she tilts her head, listening for a moment to the cascade of rain outside. It plummets to the Earth like pieces of rubble from a great city, as though the clouds have been smashed to oblivion and this is the dust they leave behind.

"I would like to speak to him," she says after a moment.

Hannibal tilts his head, and frowns. "The barracks are no place for a lady of your esteem," he says, slowly.

She grins at him. "Are you worried I will slip on a pool of blood, knock my head and faint?" she asks with a teasing laugh, hooking her hand in the crook of Hannibal's elbow and guiding him towards the corridor, and the guarded steps, leading to the barracks. The guards part for them; even the greenest of recruits know Hannibal's face. "Or perhaps I will be attacked, even with you as my personal guard, and you will not be able to protect me!"

"A 'No' on both counts," Hannibal replies. Then he smiles at her, "Though there will be a lot of blood."

Margot smiles at him, and lifts her brow again. "You think women are strangers to blood, Hannibal? Outside of this arena, and outside of war, we see far more of it than men ever do."

Hannibal tilts his head, considering this. His lips purse. "Perhaps you're right."

"If I may speak plainly, I doubt the Praetor has ever seen so much, or such lust for it," Margot says with another dismissive wave of her hand. She leans in, as though about to share some great secret; "The lady Bedelia tells me she hasn't bled for almost a year. She cannot bear him children. Such a shame."

Hannibal's brow creases, and he sighs through his nose. "Do you have your sights on the Praetor?" he asks.

"Oh, Heavens no," Margot says. "I suppose he is handsome, in that lofty Roman sort of way, but not my type."

Hannibal sighs again. "If your brother has any sway within the matter, you may not have a choice."

They pass through the second set of gates as Margot nods to this, her hair clinging to her neck as the air gets humid and warm, brought on by the sweating heat of raging men and the rain, the damp sweetness of it, as it thickens the air. Hannibal spots Will immediately, close to where he'd left him, sitting on his haunches with his back to one of the walls. His eyes are closed, chin tilted upwards, and he appears to be in deep meditation.

Yet as Hannibal approaches, his eyes snap open, and he turns his head. His eyes flash to Margot, sharp and dark, and he gives her a smile that is welcoming and fond, the same way he smiles at Alana. He pushes himself to his feet and bows his head with a grace and easiness Hannibal knows he would not show Mason.

"Domina," he says, his accent making the consonants in the word harsher than they ought to be.

"Will," Margot replies with a nod. "Please, straighten. You'll grow a permanent hunch if you stay like that."

Will pulls himself upright, and smiles at her. He still has blood on his face, coating his clothes and hands, though Hannibal can see where he has been wiping his face and licking himself clean. The behavior reminds Hannibal of a cat, grooming itself, picking at knots of clotted blood, scraps of meat and dirt, swallowing everything whole.

Margot's head tilts, and she looks Will up and down. "Would you step into the light?" she asks.

Will tilts his head, and his eyes slant to Hannibal, but he obeys when Hannibal gives him an encouraging nod. The firelight within the lanterns reaches to him, sinks into his skin and makes him shine, he glows like he might be descended from the sun god himself, a perfect beastly match of sea salt and sunlight.

Margot pulls her hand from Hannibal's arm and approaches Will, her eyes wide. She reaches out, slowly, and touches her fingers to his jaw as though afraid Will might snap at her, might bite like a cornered dog. Will merely sighs, closing his eyes, and stands with his arms clasped behind his back, letting her drag her fingers through the smear of blood still clinging to his facial hair, down, to his chin. Her thumb presses, just for a moment, and then drops to Will's clothed chest.

Hannibal shifts his weight, uncomfortable at seeing her touching Will for so long, almost reverent. He wonders if Will is capable of working his magic on her, if she is falling under the spell of his species just as Hannibal did – has, still is. He could not refuse her if she demanded Will entertain her or warm her bed.

Margot lifts her hand again, sighing, stepping closer, and cradles Will's cheek in a delicate touch. Will's eyes open to hers, ocean-dark and a beautiful blue. He does not turn his head, does not seek her touch, merely bears it as her lashes flutter, she bites her lower lip.

She says something, in Will's language, and Hannibal does not know what it means, but Will's eyes flash, widen. His shoulders visibly tense up and rise, but he doesn't jerk away from her, knowing as Hannibal knows that any outward rejection of her touch, any refusal of her wishes or any action that could be perceived as threat could mean the deaths of not just Will, and Hannibal, but all the slaves in the house.

Will looks over her shoulder, meets Hannibal's eyes, but Margot touches his other bloodied cheek and, with a gentle tug, pulls his gaze back. She presses closer still, not touching, not staining her clothes with blood, but Will's head must bow so their foreheads can rest together. She says something more, different words – yet some are the same, and Will trembles visibly.

His hands twitch, lift, and he settles them over her own. And he rasps, very quietly; "Your will, my hands."

She smiles at him, and pulls his head down further so she can kiss his forehead. Will shivers, and then she lets him go and turns away. There is a bucket of water nearby, already full of pinkish water from previous use, and she dips her hands in it, cleaning it of the blood on Will's skin.

Hannibal looks to Will, finds him regarding Margot with a calculating expression. Then, Will's eyes shift to him, and he gives Hannibal one of his lovely, sweet smiles, and the promise of anger in Hannibal's stomach settles somewhat.

He nods to Will, and then turns when Margot takes his arm and leads him back towards the gates. They go, upwards, and emerge into the street after a short walk. The rain is still coming, falling closer to shards of ice now, and the air is very cold. Margot shivers, and Hannibal pulls his cloak over her shoulders and pulls her into the warmth under his arm.

"Thank you, Hannibal," she says, cold face tucked to Hannibal's chest as they make their way through the streets. The dirt paths are muddy and slick, now, the paving stones slippery to tread. There are people kneeling in the streets, wailing their thanks to the gods above. There are children gathering water in their hands and throwing their handfuls at each other, and shrieks of laughter.

Beneath it all, softer things: farmers looking to the sky with relief; animals, lowing quietly, shaking their pelts of rain, some sitting in preparation for the storm; and there, in some dark corners, "It was the Hibernian. His name is Will. He slaughtered a man and consumed him whole and it brought the rains."

Margot lets out a quiet hum, as they turn another corner onto a street where there is at least some shelter from the rain, in the form of pieces of cloth that sag and leak in stark drips to the people below. Still, it is some relief, and Margot pulls herself free of Hannibal's cloak, though her arm remains laced as they walk briskly up the winding hill towards the cliffside ludus.

"Have you ever felt that kind of bloodlust, Hannibal?" she asks. "I have never seen such a savage thing in the arena. Most wounds are made with sword or another weapon, not with teeth and claws."

"I've never ripped a man's throat out with my teeth, no," Hannibal replies, hardly hiding his amusement. "But I daresay a man is capable of all kinds of savage things, when the heartbeat quickens." She turns, her cheeks a ruddy hue in the rain, her hair flat to her face now and dark. "You conjured a curious reaction in him, before we left."

"Are you so close to him, that you know which reactions are curious and which are normal?" she replies, her eyebrows lifting and her smile turning off-angle. Hannibal blinks at her, and curses his own hungry curiosity for getting the better of his tongue.

"I wonder how you came to know his language."

Margot laughs. "Alana taught me, of course!" she replies. "When we were children, we would speak to each other in that language, so that Mason couldn’t overhear us, and my father." She shrugs. "They are men of gold and steel, not language. They don't have the ear for it."

Hannibal nods, for that is certainly true. Neither Molson nor Mason had bothered to learn Hannibal's language, nor Jack's native tongue, nor the dialect of the house slaves that came from the deserts, or the warriors from the Rhine, or Gallia, or Hibernia. Even his knowledge of Greek, if Hannibal recalls, is sub-par.

"Will knows the common tongue well enough," he says lightly. "He would have understood, I'm sure."

Margot's smile grows wide, and she pats Hannibal's arm as they approach the villa gates. "My friend, you are a dear and trusted companion to me, and I know you will guard me and my brother, and our house, with your life." Hannibal nods, for he cannot deny it. "But there are some things I would rather not tell you – not just for the sake of my friendship, but for the sake of politeness."

"Politeness," Hannibal repeats, head tilted.

Margot stifles a laugh, and turns as Alana appears, her eyes wide and awed. In the middle of the villa entrance there is a hole in the roof, wide and ringed with gold, below which there is a pool that has long been dry during the drought. Now it is almost half-full, the water gushing into the fountain, raising the lily pads and flowers and painting the dancing shapes of waves along the walls.

"The rain has come," Alana breathes, and she looks to Hannibal. "Did Will make this happen?"

"It seems so," Hannibal replies with a nod. "The first droplet fell when Will tasted blood."

Alana's expression is one of carefully reserved happiness, but Hannibal can feel it in her when she pets down the front of her dress. Her feet are bare, and her pale skin shines with water.

"It is a blessed occasion," Margot says, and claps her hands together, "and my brother would like to see us celebrate! We must get everything in order. Alana, gather the kitchen staff and meet me here. Hannibal, my dear friend, would you mind setting those who tend the ludus to work, cleaning it up and putting everything in order? It wouldn't surprise me if Mason wanted to give a tour."

Hannibal winces, thinking of the blood still staining Cordell's cell, but he nods to her, and takes leave of the women as Alana gathers the house slaves and sets them to task. Below, beneath the shelter of the cells and flat area where the gladiators and trainees eat, he sees them gathered under Jack's watchful eye. Most of them are looking at the rain, expressions ranging from gratitude to awe.

"We have been set to purpose," Hannibal tells Jack. "Thankfully the rain should help."

Jack tilts his head. "What is our master's wish?"

"We must clean the place," Hannibal says, and nods to the still-clinging smear of blood and sweat on the sands, to the mess in the medical wing. And knows, without saying it, that Jack's

thoughts are on the ruin still left in Cordell's cell. "It is Mason's intention to throw a party tonight, and he may give a tour of the ludus. We must see it sparkling."

Jack nods, presses his lips together, and eyes the men. "We will start with the cells first," he says. "Neptune willing, they will not flood."

Hannibal smiles, and squeezes Jack's shoulder.

Hannibal is just finishing pouring the last buckets of blood-tinged water over the edge of the cliffs when Will returns. He is brought between the guard of two armored soldiers, cuffed at the back. His face is pale with cold, he's utterly clean, washed to an innocent, fresh skin by the rainfall. His short hair is dark, and plastered to his temples, his eyes shining as brilliantly as the pools of water in lantern light.

The guards uncuff him and discard him by the gate, and Hannibal smiles, handing his bucket off to the lithe slave boy who is responsible for the wooden swords, and goes to him.

Will's smile is wide and overjoyed, and he runs to Hannibal, skids to a halt like a child checking the slip of ice on winter lakes. He laughs, and lifts his head up to let the rain fall on him, and his tunic is almost see-through, sodden. He lifts his hands, and he is a picture of joy and relief as the water pools in his palms, before he turns them and lets the rain fall to his feet.

Hannibal's head tilts, and he catches Will's wrist, bringing his arm down. The brand on his forearm is not healed, not quite, but much less blistered and raw than he had been the last time Hannibal had seen him.

He looks up, head tilted in question, and Will smiles. "I told you," he whispers, and cups Hannibal's cheek. "The gods are in the rain."

Will is utterly beautiful, as tempting as Hannibal imagines forest nymphs and sirens are, and he cares not for the other men who might be gathered, cares not like Will cares not – he cups Will at the nape and pulls him in, pulls him close. Their lips meet, the rain running slick, wetting Will's mouth and when he gasps, opening, parting, Hannibal's tongue drinks from him and his thirst is finally sated.

Will is trembling, cold and undoubtedly recovering from the blood-high of his kill, and yet he yields to Hannibal's kiss with the sweetest sound, clutches and clings to him and tilts his head, so Hannibal can devour him completely.

When they part, Hannibal only has eyes for Will, and is captured in his glacial iris.

Will smiles, touches Hannibal's face with gentle hands, and then his lashes lower, his gaze darts to the side, over the cliffs. Even in such a short amount of time, the water appears risen, like it might rear up and swallow the villa completely.

"The place smells clean," he says after a moment.

Hannibal nods. "We have been tasked to prepare the ludus, in case Mason wishes to show you off to his guests tonight."

"Show me off?" Will says, head tilting. His brow creases. "I know those words, but I don't… understand."

Hannibal smiles, and leads the way towards the shelter of the medical room. This place has been cleaned as well, so the scent of blood only lingers lightly. Seeping, as things often do – as the water is now doing, soaking the ground and letting their feet track mud as they walk inside.

"Gladiators, to people like the Romans, are little better than fighting dogs," he says, and turns to look at Will, to be sure Will understands. Will presses his lips together. "They are valued by their savagery, by their muscle." He tilts his head, rakes Will up and down with dark eyes. "Their ability to be displayed."

"Displayed," Will repeats, chin lifting. "I have heard some of the men talk about these parties. They are cleaned, and taken upstairs, and forced to…*show off*." He spits the words, growling lowly. "Roman men are *savages*."

Hannibal's head tilts. "Just the men?" he asks, stepping closer so that he will not be overheard. Over the roar of the rain, the distant rumble of thunder, they are quiet and close to each other. "What did Margot say to you, in your language?"

Will swallows, and lifts his eyes to meet Hannibal's. Then, away. He tugs on Hannibal's robes, draws him closer, deeper into the shadows along the wall. He pulls Hannibal in by his hair, by his belt, and puts his mouth on Hannibal's ear;

"She knows what I am," he whispers. Hannibal's fingers clench, and curl, in the sides of Will's wet tunic. "She asked for my help."

"Your help?" Hannibal repeats.

Will nods. "There is a law, set down by her father, that only a male may rule this villa." Hannibal frowns, and pulls back. "She wants me to enchant a man, to lay with her and mount her. A man of high breeding."

"To what purpose?" Hannibal asks.

Will huffs a laugh. "You're not stupid, Hannibal," he says, very gently. He touches Hannibal's cheek, his smile sweet and fond. His fingers curl. "I am glad that she did not ask me to lay with her. I would not betray you for anything, but I would rather not risk her wrath, either."

"Will, this is -."

"She merely asked for my help," Will says, shaking his head. His eyes flash, slide over Hannibal's shoulder, and he straightens with a harsh exhale. "She did not ask me to bring her a man – I believe she has one in mind already."

Hannibal thinks of her comments towards the lady Bedelia and the Praetor, and cannot find it in himself to disagree.

He swallows, and looks over his shoulder to be sure no one is lurking, or lingering. Will's fingers touch his jaw again, guide him around to face Will, and Will lifts his chin, lifts his touch, and pulls Hannibal down into another kiss. Will's warmth blisters Hannibal's chilled flesh, makes him want to press close, find comfort and satisfaction between the heat of Will's smooth thighs.

He growls, lowly, and says, "You will have to wait a while longer."

"I can be patient," Will replies, though he certainly doesn't look patient, and the insistent press of his body doesn't feel patient, either.

Yet Hannibal smiles, and kisses Will again. "I will be required, during the event, to guard Mason and Margot and be sure they do not come to harm. When the night is over, I will visit you." Will's breath shakes, his hands find Hannibal's shoulders and clench, when Hannibal slides a hand up his injured thigh, flattens over his hip and tightens. "I will fill you, just as you like."

Will lets out a sweet, wanting sound. He lifts his head and bares his throat when Hannibal leans down, mouthing at the cling of rainwater to his flushed skin. Will's body arches, seeking, his nails digging into Hannibal's shoulders and he moans, growling low under his breath, and says something in his own language that Hannibal doesn't know.

He laughs, and kisses under Will's ear. "You'll have to teach me your language sometime soon, so I can understand you."

"He said that I was behind you, so you had to stop."

Hannibal straightens, turns to see Alana smirking at them, her arms folded. Her hair is dark, falling around her shoulders from the rain, her skin broken into fine goose bumps from the chill of it. Behind him, Will huffs a laugh and smiles at her, bowing his head in greeting – a gesture she returns. It must be a Hibernian custom.

"I've never minded an audience," he says, seeking to tease, and Will's eyes flash and he punches Hannibal lightly in the shoulder.

Alana, too, rolls her eyes. "Mason sent for you," she tells Hannibal. "And he wanted me to prepare Will, to bring him upstairs. He's going to be the main centerpiece tonight."

Hannibal sighs. He figured as much. He looks to Will, sees Will's face a careful mask of impassiveness. He reaches out and squeezes Will's shoulder, and draws him close.

"Perhaps Margot will find her prize tonight."

Will smiles at him, a strangely anticipatory light coming to his eyes, and he nods.

Hannibal passes Alana, and gently drags his knuckles down her bare arm. "Please do your best to explain to him what to expect," he tells her quietly. "We have had many years to get

used to these parties, and become accustomed to them, and he has not."

She frowns at him. "Are you that worried?" she murmurs.

Hannibal lifts one shoulder, and looks to Will, and then back to her. He tries to smile, but isn't sure how well he succeeds.

"Just try your best," he tells her, and turns away with a sigh. "You know how Romans can be."

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> warning for Mason being super creepy and also Will decapitates someone so, there's that.

For all his flaws, Hannibal must admit Mason Verger sure knows how to throw a party. It is a skill, he suspects, that was passed down from Molson, and to Molson, from his father, and so on, as far back as the Vergers have had land and wealth.

There are no less than three whole boars, one of which still has the skin and hair on it, huge tusks jutting and a collection of grapes pruning and wilting from the heat spilling from either side of its mouth. Its guts have been slashed open to create a second scene of spillage, almost obscene in its decoration, for there are pomegranates split apart and glistening on the inside, red wine held in clear jugs so that the candlelight makes them shimmer and shine, purple-brown figs and plums. And yet all of it is ruined, untouched, because of the fact that the boar's stomach and viscera has liberally coated the whole table, and leaks even now down onto the floor in a slick pool of blood. It is utterly tasteless, Hannibal thinks, and wonders if, at least, Will would want to eat it when the party is done.

Almost as if his thoughts conjured her, Alana appears at his side, gathering his attention with a touch to his arm. He meets her eyes, finds them dark, her smile somewhat strained. "He's being brought up soon," she says.

Hannibal's brows rise. "Just him?" he asks.

She shakes her head. "Jack is coming, though he will not be displayed. I believe Mason wants to show off his finest, or at least the most wild-looking."

Tasteless.

Hannibal nods, and follows her through the main entryway. The guests will be due to arrive any moment, and soon the area will be flooded with people, and with drink, and they will be surrounded by the raucous cries of Roman women, the low, devious laughs of Roman men, and the false eroticism of house slaves forced to mimic sexual acts with each other for the guests' amusement.

It is, he thinks, a heavy veil of voyeurism that Hannibal has never been comfortable with. When he was a younger man, his father had hosted parties at their home, and though they were less 'civilized', according to Roman standards, they were also combined with much less flare and fanciful things. If two guests wanted to sequester themselves, to touch each other

and revel in the darkness, they were free to do so, but no one would have *ever* touched a servant, and certainly not forced them to touch each other so that they could watch.

It's perverse, and Hannibal despises it deeply.

"Where in the name of Pluto is -? Oh! Hannibal, excellent, come in old friend, come in!"

Mason waves him in frantically, and then glares at Alana as she remains by the door. "Go fetch Margot immediately, delicate thing," he snaps, and Alana nods, turning on her heel and hurrying out towards the stables. Margot usually overseas their upkeeping and maintenance, and will be having them swept and the horses groomed to a fine sheen, just like the gladiators they keep. His stomach turns at the comparison.

"Hannibal, excellent, just the man I wanted to see," Mason says with another wave of his hand. Hannibal goes to him, stands still as Mason plants both hands on his shoulders and gives him a wide smile. "There's something I need to speak to you about. Come, drink with me!"

"Dominus," Hannibal says with a nod, accepting the cup of wine Mason gives him. He waits until Mason takes a long pull from his own glass before taking a sip. It's a tart wine, almost sour, and he winces, much preferring the Anglo honey mead or sweeter reds.

"The Gods have decided to finally piss all over us!" Mason declares, lifting his eyes. They listen, for a moment, to the heavy patter of the rain on the roof, the slosh of it down the sides of the villa and out, over the edges, into the sea. "Maybe they were worried it would come out their ass, holding it in this long."

"I'm not sure you should speak of these gods so crassly," Hannibal says, but he smiles, and Mason laughs.

"They clearly find favor with our Hibernian," he says, and Hannibal's head tilts as he takes another sip of wine. For all they know, it was simply coincidence, but knowing what he knows of Will's magic, he's inclined to agree, and wonders if Hibernian gods are capable of jealousy. If they miss, and yearn for, Will's magic and his presence in their land. "I would see them so pleased that they drown us in this rain."

Hannibal's brows rise. "What do you suggest?"

"Will did not sustain any real blows during his fight," Mason says. He tips his cup back, hissing through his teeth, and refills it from a larger jug on his desk. There are papers scattered all around it, contracts and shipping documents and all sorts of other things Hannibal knows Mason would rather not trouble himself with. He is a man of blood and violence, not paper and ink, but Roman women are not trusted with such things, so Margot is not allowed to oversee any of it. Mason takes another drink, puts his weight on one side, and presses his lips together, giving a considering hum. "He's quite pretty, isn't he?"

Hannibal's stomach tenses, and he sets his wine cup down. "He certainly has a wildness in him," he says slowly.

"Mm, you know, in my father's time, a lot of well-bred women would pay dearly for a chance to get some wildness in *them*," he says, tone faraway, dreamlike. His eyes shine. "What do you think?"

"If you're suggesting loaning Will out to stud, I would advise against it," Hannibal replies, and tries not to let any anger or disgust show in his voice. "He hardly has the reputation yet."

"He is the bringer of rains, Hannibal!" Mason crows, utterly delighted.

Hannibal nods. "But he also ripped a man's throat out with his teeth," he replies. "And killed your champion in his sleep. He is not an honorable man."

Mason scoffs. "You fighters and your honor," he says. Hannibal's fingers curl. "But I suppose you're right – we can hardly parade this savage around and let him mount all the Roman mares while he's still so green!" He laughs, and Hannibal tries very, very hard not to think about how easy it would be to take the knife at his belt and slice it across Mason's neck.

Before he is forced to come up with something to say in response, Margot appears at the doorway, her eyes wide and cheeks flushed like she ran from the stables. There is water in her hair and staining her dress, making it cling to her body as she pulls to a halt before her brother.

"Mason, you called for me?" she asks, Alana appearing as a dark shadow at her shoulder.

Mason smiles, and sets his cup down, going to his sister. He puts his hands on her shoulders, sighing, and tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "You are so beautiful," he says, and she flushes, shivering in the cold – or perhaps under the predatory sharpness in Mason's eyes. "The gods have blessed us, Margot – they will make the land fertile again. Maybe we will finally find you a husband at this celebration and see new life in the ludus."

Margot presses her lips together, her throat flexing in a sharp swallow. She puts her hands over her flat stomach, and her eyes shift, just for a moment, to Hannibal.

"I…am flattered that you are thinking of me," she says kindly, smile strained. "But I would never be parted from you, sweet brother, if the will of the gods matched my desires."

Mason smiles, and pulls her in, kissing her forehead. When he lets her go, there is a sheen of saliva on her skin, and she swallows, but waits for him to turn before she wipes it off. "We will see," he says, and takes his wine glass in hand again, finishing the second cup. "Have preparations been made?"

"The kitchen is ready, and your requested gladiators have been prepared. They await your order to be brought up."

"Excellent. Hannibal, you will stand guard with Jack, to be sure none of them behave in a way that will embarrass us." Hannibal nods, surprised but immensely pleased at Mason's order. His normal duties put him at Mason's side as he flits between highborn folk and people of fine breeding, garnering favor as every cobra might before it strikes. "Margot, go bathe and make yourself presentable. You will be the finest jewel tonight."

Margot bows her head in deference, and turns, taking Alana by the hand and going to her rooms. Mason smiles at their retreating backs, dark-eyed and almost ravenous. Hannibal doesn't like the look on his face at all.

"Say what you will about my father, he knew how to breed a fine woman," he says, after another moment of silence. Mason hums, lifting his chin, and fixes his eyes on Hannibal, and Hannibal forces himself to school his expression so his revulsion doesn't show. "I find the thought of another man's hands on her…undesirable, but it must be done."

Hannibal nods. "She is certainly of the marrying age," he tells Mason. Past it, in fact – the Romans claim their girls young. Another thing Hannibal finds utterly, distastefully different about this culture. "Have you a man in mind for her?"

Mason shakes his head, sighing, like this is the heaviest weight on his shoulders. What a life that must be. "What about you, my old friend?" he asks, head tilting, his eyes sharp. "You are a free man now, for all intents and purposes. You have had many years to consider taking a wife."

Hannibal frowns. "I feel the same sentiment as your beloved sister," he replies coolly. "I would not leave your side, until you have no need of me anymore."

Mason's smile widens at that, charming and slick. "I am glad to hear it," he purrs. "Now, go fetch my titans. Have them stand around the pool, so that my guests can drink their fill of savage flesh."

Hannibal bows his head. "Dominus."

They have shaved the warriors of their facial hair, and bathed them so that there is no sweat, no blood on them. There is an oil the Romans use to make muscles glisten and shine, and Hannibal, when he first sees Will, finds himself for a moment unable to take in air.

Will is *beautiful*. His eyes are as dark as the storm clouds, and he is dressed in a simple piece of cloth that hides his manhood, though it dips low at his hips and rides high on his thighs so there is very little left to the imagination. Will is standing beside Randall, who despite not having earned the brand has proved himself to be a vicious fighter during training. Next to Randall is Francis, a man with savage scarring on his upper lip and who stands tall, and has a fierceness to him typical of a Gaul. Then, there is Elliot – a Roman man who joined the ludus to pay his gambling debts and to provide for his wife and children. Next to him, Garrett, another Gaul. He has earned quite the reputation in the arena, though his fights are never high-profile. He is one of those brought out for amusement before the main event.

Jack is at the other end of the line, dressed in his usual Doctore's clothing and armor, though it is cleaner and has had better care taken of it, and the leather and gold brooches shine in the lantern light. Next to Jack stands two guards, dressed in armor reminiscent of Centurions but

with the Verger seal branded across the chest piece. They, and Jack, are the only ones carrying weapons.

Will catches his eye and smiles at him, though there is a darkness in his gaze that reveals something prowling, something tensed. Hannibal goes to him and takes his place on the other end of the line. In contrast to Will, who stands in utter stillness, Randall is a jittery presence at his side.

"Is this what we are?" Randall asks, in his language, low. "We are no better than statues."

Will laughs, and smiles at him. "Statues are not worshipped as much as we are," he replies.

Francis huffs a breath, beside them both. "Be careful how you speak," he says, in Latin. "Our masters do not look kindly on the dogs growling to each other in a language they do not know."

Hannibal can personally attest to that. Behind them, in the pool which is now filled with water, house slaves have been dressed in gold and fine silk. They are wearing masks meant to be tributes to Jupiter, and Venus, and Juno. The women have golden attachments around their hips to mimic erections, and they are all writhing together in a slick display, moaning loudly, tasting each other. There is one pair that are already mounted, the man pressing the woman down into the water so she's at risk of drowning.

Will's nostrils flare, and he lifts his eyes, his eyes on the main entrance. "I was told what to expect," he says to Hannibal, low enough so only Hannibal can hear.

He presses his lips together, and nods. "I advised Mason not to let any Roman proposition for some time with you," he says. Will tilts his head, lifts his eyes, and lets out a curious sound. "I cannot say for sure he will not demand you mount a slave girl, though, for the sake of entertainment."

Will lets out a low, angry sound, and turns his gaze away. In front of them is another pair of slaves, two women, touching each other with soft grazes that Hannibal knows are going to do nothing in terms of sexual satisfaction. But they are both moaning, loud and long, and he sighs, rolling his shoulders.

"This is barbaric," Will whispers. Hannibal smiles.

"It is the Roman way," he replies.

Will huffs, and says something in his own language that Hannibal does not need a translator to understand the sentiment of.

The Praetor and lady Bedelia arrive first. She is a vision, resplendent in gold and red, and her hair shines in a halo of waves atop her head, a few strands falling. It is a city fashion, as he understands it, meant to encourage men to want to reach out and bare the whole of her long

neck. She is wearing a thick, low-hanging gold necklace that makes the eye gravitate naturally to the swell of her breasts, another neat band of gold making her dress pull in tight and flare outward around her stomach, hinting at fertility. He thinks of what Margot told him, and smiles.

"Ah, Praetor Dimmond! And Bedelia. Welcome," Mason says, going to them with his arms outstretched in a gesture of friendship. Behind him, Margot and Alana flank him, Margot in the purple and gold plumage of their house, Alana in a more muted shade, lilacs and lilies. Margot gives them wine and Alana offers a plate of cherries. Bedelia smiles at her and takes one, sucking the fruit from the stem with a hollowing of her cheeks that Hannibal sees Anthony watch closely.

Then, Bedelia's eyes gravitate to the line of warriors between Hannibal and Jack, and her eyes flash with barely concealed interest. She tugs the stem from her teeth and sets it on the plate Alana is holding. "Oh, exquisite," she says, and parts from the group, heading straight for Will.

Will is a statue beside Hannibal, his fingers curling behind his back as Bedelia steps close to him. She tucks a single finger beneath his bare chin, makes him raise his head and arch to one side, baring his neck. She smiles. "The bringer of rains," she says softly. Anthony and Mason come up behind her, Margot and Alana set to the task of greeting and welcoming the other guests.

"Be careful, my dear," Anthony says, pulling her hand away. "Dogs like this can bite."

"Oh, he would never!" Mason says, as Bedelia smiles at Anthony, a single brow arched. "My dogs are all impeccably well trained."

"Is this not the same savage who murdered your champion?" Anthony asks with amusement. Mason's eyes darken and Hannibal sees, out of the corner of his eye, Will straighten his stance. Will's humor feels like warmth, his pleasure like a physical touch, and Hannibal wants to reach out and touch him, wants to feed him, and fill him.

Then, Will speaks; "Murder implies he was my equal."

The ambiance of the room goes very, very cold. Anthony's eyes widen, looking to Will, as though surprised that a slave would dare to speak to him directly, let alone in a challenge. Mason's expression is one of black rage.

But Bedelia laughs. "Well said," she says, grinning widely and touching her fingers to Will's chest. Her hand slicks through the oil on his skin, marring the shine of it, and she turns to the Praetor with another wide smile. "Dogs do not murder, my love. They slaughter each other."

Anthony hums, tilting his head. "That is true," he says. He takes Bedelia's hand from Will again, lacing their fingers together tightly in a possessive move. "Tell me, Mason, do you believe there is a man equal to the skill of the bringer of rains?"

Mason's eyes snap to Anthony, and his expression clears. "Are you asking for a demonstration, friend?"

Anthony smiles. "The man I submitted before was clearly no match for him," he says coolly. Hannibal's chest tenses when Will lifts his chin, exposing his neck, and Anthony looks at him for a long, long time, as though lost in the slope of Will's bared throat, the arch of his shoulders. He clears his throat and looks away. "I would see him tested again."

Mason laughs, clapping his hands together. "Oh, wonderful! Send any man you wish, my friend. If it's blood and sport you want I am happy to provide!"

Anthony's smile is wide. "I have just the man," he says. He takes Bedelia as he steps back. "I shall fetch him immediately."

"Excellent," Mason purrs. Once the Praetor is gone, wrath descends on him again, and he turns, snarling, and takes Will by the throat, squeezing tight enough that his skin turns white at the edges. "If you *ever* speak out of turn again," he growls, shaking Will's neck. Will presses his lips together, bearing the harsh touch, and Hannibal's hands tighten to fists at his sides. "I swear I'll fuck you up so bad you'll think Jupiter himself just rammed his cock down your throat and split you in two!"

He shoves Will, who stumbles just a step, and lets him go, rolling his shoulders. Will corrects his stance, silent, giving nothing away. He looks at Hannibal. "Muzzle your dog in the future," he snaps, and stalks away. "Margot! Clear a space. The Praetor wishes for a fight!"

Hannibal eyes Will, leaning in close. "Are you alright?" he asks.

Will winces, but nods. He gives Hannibal one of his sweet, gorgeous smiles, and then looks down at his chest. He touches his fingers to the smear of oil, over where Bedelia touched him, and his smile widens. He brings his fingers to his mouth and tastes them.

"I think," he purrs, "I have found Margot a man."

By the time Anthony returns with his man, the Verger villa is awash with people. The air reeks heavily of sex, sweat, and thick Roman oils. Hannibal's nose is stinging like someone lit a fire in it, and he watches with apprehension as Mason gestures for him to come over.

There has been an area cleared – it is, he notes, the same place where the gutted boar piled high with ruined fruit once was. Now there is a crowd gathered around it. Hannibal eyes the slick floor, rain and pinkish guts scattered about.

"My friends!" Mason cries, calling for silence. "The Praetor has generously provided one of his guards, to challenge Will, our champion of the day! We shall see the gods once again satisfied with an offering of blood!"

The crowd cheers, less boisterously than the arena crowds, but no less eager. Hannibal catches Mason's eye, nods, and goes to retrieve Will.

Will is breathing heavily, his eyes shining with anticipation. He follows Hannibal with an eager smile, and the crowd parts and melts into a mass behind them as Will steps into the open area. Hannibal sees Anthony's man – he is a hulking brute, a little taller than Will, and heavily armored. He notes that there is a thick pad of leather around his neck, to stave off Will's bite.

Will eyes the man, chin lifted. Bare as he is, and without a weapon, the man's heavy armor and imposing stance render him the clear favorite. Hannibal wants to think he knows better, but Will hasn't eaten since his kill in the arena, and he can see a subtle twitch of his fingers, a hunger in his eyes. Will licks his lips and turns his head to regard Mason.

"Hannibal," Mason calls, and smiles widely at Will, "you still have your knife, yes?"

Hannibal nods, and takes it out of his belt. He hands it to Will.

Beside Anthony, Bedelia lifts her chin, brows arching up. "Only a knife, Mason? Surely you value your dog's life more than that."

"It is not his life, but his skill that I place value in, fair lady," Mason replies. "As you said, he slaughtered my champion, and used naught but his bare hands to do it." He folds his arms across his chest and looks to Will again, challenging. "I have no doubt he will give us a fine show."

Will isn't looking at Mason anymore – his eyes are on the man.

"What is your champion's name, Praetor?" Mason asks.

Anthony smiles. "He is a fierce warrior from the South, by name of Rinaldo Pazzi."

"Ah, Pazzi, a fine house," Mason says. He smiles at Anthony. "I suppose this will be another death match?"

"Of course," Anthony replies.

Mason nods, and claps his hands together. "Well, then, let us not keep the guests waiting a moment longer!"

Hannibal's jaw clenches, his fingers curling tightly behind his back so his knuckles whiten. He has no doubt about Will's skill, nor his bloodlust, but he cannot help but worry. Pazzi is fully kitted, there are only small points of vulnerability below his arms, and at his knees and elbows – the rest is covered with armor and leather. It will take more than one blow to fell him, and with his neck covered, Will cannot go for the throat.

And Will has no armor, no defense. He could be felled by one well-placed slash of Pazzi's sword.

Above them, the thunder rumbles, and lightning splits the sky enough to whiten everyone's faces. Will swallows, rolls his shoulders, and grips the knife Hannibal gave him tightly. It is a fairly long blade, if pushed into the heart of a man it would still the organ instantly, but Will has to get to it first.

He circles, and the crowd pulls back enough to give room so that they are not struck by an errant sword. Pazzi's face is exposed, his expression grim, almost sad, like he knows how terrible the odds are in his favor and pities Will, for he will surely die.

Hannibal's heart lurches as Pazzi lunges, swiping for Will's neck. Will ducks, parrying the sword blow, and knocks his shoulder heavily into Pazzi's stomach as if testing the give of his armor. He gets a grunt for his trouble, but the man is thick with muscle, and heavy, and he only stumbles a step.

Pazzi lunges again and this time Will grabs his arm, turns and forces the man to pull across his back. He growls, his head low, and folds his arm, trying to sink his knife into the exposed armpit, but the angle is wrong and the cut is not deep. Pazzi shoves him away and kicks him in the back, sending him to his knees.

Hannibal tenses, his heart lurching to his throat. Mason's eyes are black, his lips pressed into a thin line.

Will pushes himself upright and turns as Pazzi rushes him, sword aimed to strike at Will's heart but Will catches the blade, and his snarl echoes the rumble of thunder as he turns his knife, slides it slick and easy up Pazzi's arm, severing skin where his brace ends, deep into his elbow.

The scent of blood is heavy, and Will pulls away, his hands slick with it. He lifts his fingers to his mouth, sucks on his forefinger the same way Bedelia sucked on the cherry. Then, a strange turn comes over him. His shoulders grow lax, and, slowly, he smiles.

He says something, in his own language, just as Alana appears at Hannibal's side.

"What did he say?" he whispers.

Alana's face is pale, her expression wide-eyed and anxious. "He said -." But she falls silent as Will lunges with a snarl, his eyes shining, and Pazzi clearly wasn't expecting a man so lacking in armor to attack him. His sword cuts into Will's shoulder and Will grabs the piece of leather around his neck, yanking it free. Buckles snap and pop, and the pieces comes apart, and Will grins and throws it into the crowd.

They are stirring, now, like a great beast hungering for blood. Pazzi shoves Will away and swings his sword in a wide arc and Will jumps back, growling now in earnest, a continuous sound of a hunting animal.

Alana swallows, and says; "'Rejoice'. That's what he said."

The same thing he said to the Rhine man, right before he killed him.

Hannibal presses his lips together, and turns his eyes to the fight.

Blood has slicked the floor now, Will's and Pazzi's. Will has the cut on his shoulder, bleeding heavily and mixing with the oil and sweat on his chest. Pazzi's wound in the elbow and under his arm is bleeding less, but still there, and the ground is wet with it.

Pazzi lunges again, and Will takes his arm in the same move, but this time he forces it under his own, presses his back tight to Pazzi's chest. Pazzi's eyes widen, he blinks rapidly, and Will turns his head and smiles at him. His free hand comes up and pets over the man's thick beard, and it's such a strangely intimate gesture, Hannibal's gut clenches up and he lets out a low growl of his own.

Will's eyes flash to him, and his smile turns apologetic.

Stop playing with your food.

Will nods, as though the words were said aloud. He yanks on Pazzi's arm, tears off his wrist brace that was compromised from his previous blow, and bites down, heavily, on the man's wrist. Heavy enough that he drops his sword, and blood wells up as Will's teeth sever through skin, through tendon and muscle. He gives a yell of alarm, shoving at Will's shoulders, and Will lets him go, laughing with triumphant joy as he kicks at the man's sword, sending it out of reach.

He rushes for it, and picks it up. Knife in one hand, sword in the other, he turns, eyeing Pazzi as he cradles his ruined wrist.

Mason laughs, and looks to Anthony. "Still to the death?" he asks, barely concealing his glee.

Anthony's eyes are wild with rage, but Hannibal knows this sort of man – to surrender the fight would be an admission of loss, of honor, much higher than he would suffer losing Pazzi to a gladiator of Will's esteem.

He turns to another guard. "Give him your sword," he snaps, and the man nods, wide-eyed, unsheathing his blade and Pazzi takes it in his left hand, hissing as his injured arm bleeds heavily onto the ground. It's too slick to move with any haste, now, and Hannibal sees his hesitation when he takes a step and his boot slides through the blood and rainwater.

Will smiles, wide and pleased, and circles again. He says something and Alana sucks in a breath, trembling. Hannibal cannot find it in himself to ask, but Will's voice is low, almost soothing, and powerful as the crash of waves against the cliffs, vibrates in his chest like the roar of the thunder.

This is Will's magic. This is enchantment.

Pazzi snarls, and lunges, and Hannibal's eyes widen as Will doesn't deflect, doesn't pull away. The man's sword sinks into his flank, a deep cut that gushes blood, and Will lifts his chin, lifts his sword and his knife. He fits it in an 'X' on either side of Pazzi's throat, and brings them together.

Pazzi's head falls, rolling to a halt at Mason's feet. The body gushes blood and Will snarls, dropping his weapons as the body falls to its knees. He takes it by the ruined edges of its neck and lowers his mouth, and Hannibal swallows, for Will drinks it down like he takes Hannibal's cock – his lips, wide and red, his cheeks hollowed and throat eagerly working to swallow every last drop of blood as it gushes from Pazzi's body.

This is hunger. Hannibal's fingers clench so that he does not run to Will.

For a moment, everything is silent, and then the crowd begin to clap, and cheer. The thunder rumbles above them, heavier now like the purr of a pleased god, and Mason lets out a crow of delight.

"At this rate, my friend, you will run out of men who can stand against Will!"

Anthony is watching, his face pale and his eyes wide. When the blood stops flowing, Will kicks the body back and wipes his hand across his mouth. He turns, looks at Anthony, and smiles, holding his arms out in a gesture of welcome just like Mason does.

"Smile, friend!" he says, in Latin so they can understand. "The rains will fall for days now!"

Anthony swallows, gripping Bedelia's arm tightly, and Mason laughs.

"Neptune willing," he cries. "Hannibal, where are you?"

Hannibal steps forward, his feet slicking through the growing pool of blood.

"Take my titan and tend to his wounds. Let us have someone clean up this mess and we shall resume the festivities with this creature's promise in our hearts and his blood in our souls. Please, my friends, feast and find pleasure in everything my ludus may offer you."

Will turns to Hannibal, and though he is trembling, now, and bleeding heavily from his shoulder and flank, he smiles. Hannibal takes his arm, and leads him through the crowd, leads him past the row of other fighters, and Jack, and down to the stairs that lead to the gates of the ludus.

There are some warriors gathered, listening to the festivities above, and they stand, wide-eyed as they see Hannibal and Will pass by them. "Gods, another man," one whispers. "Does the monster's bloodlust never end?"

"He brought the rain," another replies, snapping. "He is not a monster, but a blessing."

Hannibal smiles, and leads Will to the cleaned medical room. He sits Will down on one of the benches, eyeing his wounds. "It will be best to burn these," he says, thumbing delicately at Will's uninjured shoulder. Will's face is a mask of pain, tight, but his eyes burn with gold when he raises them to meet Hannibal's.

He smiles, and shakes his head, standing. He is weak, now, and leans heavily on Hannibal, and looks out. "Take me to the sea," he says.

Hannibal frowns. "You are injured," he says in protest, though Will seems content to ignore him, and has already started to pull him back out to the cliffs. The cold wind and the heavy rain soak into them immediately, cleansing Will of Pazzi's blood.

Will shakes his head again. "I made a promise," he says. His voice is breathy and soft, hardly audible over the roar of the ocean and the rain. Hannibal helps him to the cliffside and Will

sits, settling with a heavy sigh. He turns his gaze up, and smiles, cupping his hands so water pools in them.

"A promise?" Hannibal repeats.

Will nods, and takes his pool of water, pressing it to his shoulder. It glistens on his skin, soaks into his wound, and Will hisses, and does it again, this time to his side. More blood rushes out, heavy with the beat of his pulse. "I must let the Earth, and the ocean, drink from me," he says. "As I drank from that man. As I drink from you."

Hannibal shivers, pressing his lips together. Will keeps pooling water in his hands, letting it rush down his face, his neck, his shoulders and chest. He is wiping away all traces of Rome – the wounds, the oil, and the sweat, and he shines beautifully, pale and lovely to Hannibal's eyes.

Hannibal cannot resist reaching out. He cups Will's jaw, turns him so their eyes meet, and Will smiles, lashes fluttering as the water hits his face, plasters his hair to his forehead. He leans in and Hannibal sighs, closing his eyes when their foreheads touch. Will is fever-warm, despite the cold air and the rain, and burns into Hannibal's skin where they meet.

"You fought wonderfully," he breathes, after another long stretch of quiet.

Will smiles again, and pulls back. He's no longer bleeding, Hannibal notices, though he's pale enough for Hannibal to think that might be a result of too much blood loss, and nothing to do with the healing rain. "I wonder when they will grow tired," he says quietly. "After a while a favorite becomes the inevitable."

"Inevitable," Hannibal repeats. "Like your designs against Rome?"

Will laughs. "Still on that?" he asks, and smiles at Hannibal. His hand flattens, warm and wide, on Hannibal's thigh. "Do not trouble yourself with that, yet. There are still things that need to be done here."

"Between you and Margot, a great many secrets are piling up," Hannibal says with a smile.

Will laughs again. "Oh, Margot," he breathes, and turns his eyes to the sea. "She will visit me, tonight, I'm sure, when the crowds are gone." He blinks, and lowers his lashes, looks to Hannibal from the corner of his eye. "Would it be too great a scandal, should she find you in my bed?"

Hannibal frowns, tilting his head. "You cannot possibly suggest I feed you, in your current state," he says.

Will smiles, biting his lower lip, but, after a moment, shakes his head. "No," he says, with a sigh that is heavy with regret. "No. My body belongs to the gods, tonight. But…" His head tilts, and his eyes are on his hand as he pets over Hannibal's thigh, "I would not be unhappy to simply lie next to you."

And, Hannibal thinks, with a very sudden pull in his chest, he would not be unhappy about that either.

"May I kiss you?" he asks softly, cupping Will's face and making his eyes lift.

Will smiles, and leans in. But before their lips can meet, his hand rises from Hannibal's thigh and flattens over his mouth and, instead, he kisses the back of his bloody knuckles.

"Tomorrow," he says, when he pulls away. "Tomorrow you can have me however you desire."

Hannibal smiles, and licks his lips, tasting blood and magic and rain. He takes Will's hand and squeezes, their fingers lacing.

"Tomorrow, then."

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They stay out by the cliffs well past the time when all the guests have left and the warriors have been escorted back to the ludus cells. Will turns his head and smiles at Randall, Francis, Elliot, and Garett as Jack leads them back to their cells. Tomorrow, if Mason is feeling generous, he will send slaves from the brothels down there to satisfy the men for a performance well-done.

And Hannibal knows Will won't indulge, even though he's the only one that, in Hannibal's opinion, earned it.

But that is more than okay. Hannibal is certainly capable of seeing him rewarded.

It rains through the night, a veritable torrent of cold water and biting wind, and yet Will does not shiver, he does not flinch as he grows pale and lovely in the moonlight. He doesn't move until the wounds on his shoulder and in his flank stop bleeding, and then, driven by some internal clock Hannibal is not aware of, he shifts to life, breathes in and closes his eyes, looking up at the moon, veiled by clouds.

He turns to Hannibal and offers him a sweet smile. "Come," he says, and holds out his hand. Hannibal takes it, both of them clean and cold as they go to Will's cell. The air is full of snoring and lantern light and they go to Will's cell, the door closing behind them with a soft metallic whine.

Will begins to shake as they are enveloped in air that, while not warm, is significantly more pleasant on the skin than the rain and ocean-wind had been. Hannibal embraces him, rubbing up and down Will's arms in an attempt to dry and warm him and sighs as Will does the same, hugging Hannibal tightly over the cling of his wet robes.

He pulls back and tugs on the belt around Hannibal's waist. Hannibal tilts his head, raising an eyebrow.

"We'll warm up quicker if we're dry," Will says. Hannibal nods and helps him to shed his clothes – what they put on Will to cover his most intimate area falls to his feet with a wet flop, and they both laugh at the sodden sound. Will tugs him by the hands to the bed and brings the blanket around their shoulders. It is not a thick blanket, nor very large, but they manage to get it stretched across their backs and they curl up beneath it, fingers tucked under arms, behind knees, where the flesh is warmest. Will pulls Hannibal's hand to between his soft thighs and squeezes, Will's own hands tucked behind his knees and Hannibal leans against him, letting Will warm his face in Hannibal's neck.

Will lets out a quiet noise, one contented and lax as they lean against the back wall. "The hour is late," Hannibal says, resisting the urge to pull back and check Will's injuries. The other man is not moving stiffly, nor does he have any of that fever-sweetness that would hint

at infection, but he lost a lot of blood and though Hannibal cannot feel any fresh wetness on him, he cannot imagine Will is in prime health.

He looks pale, and there are circles beneath his eyes like he has gone many nights without sleep. He breathes out through his nose, low-lidded, and rests his cheek on Hannibal's shoulder.

"I have to wait up for Margot," he says, though he sounds tired. "You may sleep, if you'd like."

Hannibal sighs and shakes his head. "I doubt she will be coming down here during the night," he says. "Especially if what Mason intends comes to pass." Will makes a curious sound, shifting his weight. "Mason intends to find her a suitable husband, to marry her off and see her breed."

Will hums. "He is an arrogant man," he murmurs.

"Oh? Did you not make a bargain with her to secure the same thing?" Hannibal asks, unable to stop himself smiling. "Or, no, perhaps I've misunderstood. You merely promised to bring her a man, to do with as she sees fit."

"I know you're speaking in jest, but there is a difference," Will says softly. His hair is wet, dripping down Hannibal's shoulder, as he nuzzles into Hannibal's neck. "There is a difference between what Mason wants and what Margot wants."

Hannibal sighs, nodding once. "I know," he murmurs.

Will hums, and stands after a moment. He lets the blanket slide from his body and goes to the gate, curling his fingers in the iron and looking upwards. The wound on his flank has darkened and in the low light it looks almost black, like some great and acidic beast clawed at his side. His shoulder wound is not as deep but it is horrifically bruised, and Hannibal isn't sure how he's able to move his neck or lift his arms without pain.

Will smiles, and turns. "Get dressed," he says, and bends down to pick up Hannibal's robes, which are still very wet and drip when he hands them over. "She's on her way."

Hannibal tilts his head, but obeys, hissing in discomfort as his dried and warmed skin comes into contact with the uncomfortable wet clothing. Perhaps he will escort Margot back upstairs and find something more suitable to wear, that is drier – and maybe he will bring Will a second blanket, for he is surely freezing cold, and having lost so much blood it would be a tragedy to lose him during the night to fever.

Will has pulled underwear and the tunic Alana first gave him back on, and they hear the gates to the ludus open as Will hands Hannibal his belt back.

Will smiles at him, and Hannibal has just finished securing his belt when a shadow falls across the entrance to Will's cell. It is Margot, still in her gold and purple dress of the night, though it is darker in places from the rain and her hair is no longer pulled up, but falling about her face and neck in long waves. Behind her, shadowed, is Alana.

Margot smiles at Will, and freezes when she meets Hannibal's eyes. A moment of confusion passes over her face and she tilts her head. Hannibal meets her gaze steadily, and then Margot's attention is caught as Will approaches her. Neither of them makes any move to open the cell door.

"Domina," Will greets, bowing his head.

She smiles at him, her eyes glassy and bright like perfume bottles. "You performed wonderfully tonight, Will," she says, and Hannibal is glad she is speaking in Latin, though he's sure Alana would be more than happy to provide translation. Even as the thought crosses his mind, Alana steps up beside Margot and relays her words in Will's language, so that nothing is lost between the four of them.

Will smiles when Alana is finished, and lifts his head. He neither preens for nor brushes off her praise. Margot tilts her head, her eyes flashing to Hannibal, and she clears her throat.

"Margot," Alana says, touching Margot's shoulder in a way Hannibal finds interesting. Interesting, too, that Alana uses Margot's first name. Hannibal is a freed man, and has that luxury though he chooses for the sake of Mason's pride to refer to him by title, but Alana is duty-bound to address her master and mistress as such. The use of Margot's first name betrays an intimacy Hannibal expected her to hide better. "Hannibal knows what Will is. He is our friend in this."

Margot's brow creases, and she looks at Hannibal again, her throat bobbing as she swallows. "So…you know what he's capable of?"

Hannibal huffs a small laugh, coming forward. "I think it's fair to say that none of us quite know what Will is capable of." Will turns to him, grinning. "But whatever your designs are, Margot, I sense that you could use all the friends you can get."

Margot tilts her head, regarding him coolly. "You are my brother's friend, too," she says, heavy with reservation. Hannibal lifts a shoulder in a shrug. She presses her lips together and her fingers curl around the bars of Will's cage. "Why are you here, Hannibal?"

Hannibal smiles. "For the same reason you are, I imagine," he replies. Margot's eyes flash.

Will huffs a laugh and raises his hand, patting Hannibal gently on the chest. "We must settle this quickly," he says, and tugs on the door of the cage. Margot blinks, and shies back as it creaks open. "Before the moon is too low."

"The moon?" Margot repeats, and follows Will out into the rain. Will looks over his shoulder at her, smiling, and she frowns, following the cover of the ludus out of the rain while Will walks through the training ground, towards the cliff.

Hannibal looks to Alana and sees her wide-eyed with wonder, but smiling. She looks at Hannibal and shivers, folding her arms across her chest, and nods to Will who is easily the least clothed out of all of them. "Isn't he cold?" she asks.

"I don't think he feels the rain like we do," Hannibal replies. He walks with her behind Margot, under the cover of the balcony above them. "He told me the gods were in the rain. Is this a Hibernian belief?"

She nods. "My father believed there were gods for everything," she replies. "For grass, for stones, for rivers and hills. For everything that lives and through living affects life, there is a god. Or so he believed." She shrugs one shoulder. "There are so many places with different beliefs that I think all of them are right, or none of them are right."

He smiles at her. "Do not let the Roman water god hear you," he says, nudging her playfully. "I do not know how much rain Will's sacrifice bought us, but we would do well not to take it for granted."

She smiles, and they come to a stop, flanking Margot at the last square of the covering. There is a wall at waist-height that merges into the villa edge, so no one can walk in front of it over the precarious cliffs, and it opens on the right to where Will is standing. He toes the very edge and is looking down, water beating down his shoulders, running along his pale cheeks and dripping from his curled fingers.

He lifts his head and lifts his hands, gathering water into his cupped palms, and raises it to his lips to drink. Impossible though it is, Hannibal thinks that the water spilling from the corner of his mouth shines as though lit from within; the same golden color he sometimes sees in Will's eyes. Will takes another drink, and on the third handful he looks down into the pool in his hands, head tilted like he's watching something within the water.

His brow furrows, and he looks up to the sky again as though in question. There is no answer, none that Hannibal can see, except for a distant flash of lightning and, seconds later, a rumble of thunder. Will's shoulders roll at the sound and he hisses, dropping his handful of water and pressing down on the wound.

He turns to look at them, and holds out his hand. "Domina," he murmurs. "Please."

She hesitates, casting Alana and Hannibal an unsure look. Alana gives her a reassuring smile and cups her arm.

"I'll go with you," she says, and leads the way out into the rain. Margot follows, allowing herself to be led, and Hannibal brings up the rear. Will offers both of his hands and takes Margot's, turning her at the wrists so she's cupping her hands like he is and water can pool in them. She is shivering in the cold rain.

Will kneels down, and speaks in his language. Margot frowns and looks at Alana.

"He says you must make your wish. Concentrate, and be sure, and when you have decided what you want, he will drink the water and the gods will hear it through him."

Margot swallows, and looks down at her hands.

Will cups his under hers again, and meets her eyes. "Be certain," he says. "You must be very, very certain."

She nods, and takes a deep, shaky breath. And closes her eyes. "Must I say it aloud?" she asks.

Will smiles, and shakes his head. "No, domina," he murmurs, and lets his hands fall. "They will hear."

She nods again, and opens her eyes, and offers a small smile. "I'm ready."

Will's smile widens, and he cups her hands again, tilting so that the tips of her fingers form a funnel, and he bows down, letting the water pour into his mouth. Margot watches with wide eyes, her fingers curling as he swallows, and then Will lets her go and she takes a step back, rubbing her hands together.

Will is at a crouch, now, on his toes and his knuckles, beast-like. He gasps, bowing his head, as another thick roll of thunder rumbles across the sky above them. He pushes himself to his feet abruptly and smiles at Margot, and opens his arms as if to embrace her.

"Rejoice," he says. It is in his language, but Hannibal knows the word now. Will tilts his head and says, in Latin; "When did you last bleed?"

Margot flushes, and cups her stomach. "I finished three days past," she answers.

Will nods. "Before you bleed again, you will see your wish fulfilled," he replies, and her eyes widen. "The gods smile on you, domina. They want to see you satisfied."

"How can you be certain?" Margot asks, whisper-soft.

Will is brilliant with joy, and he lifts his face to the sky. "Because it is still raining," he murmurs. He holds his arms up and laughs when another crash of thunder rolls over them, and the lightning paints his eyes golden. "This is their blessing, and it is vast and full. They weep with joy for us below them. Can you feel it?"

And strange as it is, Hannibal thinks he can. The rain feels warmer, now, or perhaps he is simply getting used to it. Will laughs, high and child-like, and he sets his eyes to the ocean.

Margot nods, cupping her stomach again, a small smile on her face. "Thank you, Will," she murmurs. "If what you say is true, I will see you richly rewarded for your service."

Will nods to her, his smile wide and serene. "Thank you, domina," he says, and bows his head again. She returns the gesture, and they straighten in unison. "Now, you must go. Rest, and feast, and trust in the will of the gods."

"I trust," Margot says. "Thank you, Will." She takes Alana's hand and the women turn, rushing to find shelter out of the rain. The gates to the ludus open and shut, and are locked behind them.

Hannibal watches them go, and his attention returns to Will when the other man approaches him and presses close, cupping Hannibal's face. "It is past midnight," he murmurs, his eyes dark. He turns, his hands sliding to Hannibal's belt, and he tugs him towards the cells. "My body is yours once again."

Hannibal blinks, and tilts his head, but lets Will lead him back to the cell. "You are still injured," he murmurs, though Will is no longer bleeding, and in the short time they were outside, the bruises seem lesser now. The pallor of a man's skin highlights injuries more starkly but Will looks beautiful, looks healing. The wound on his flank appears dry from blood as Will sheds his tunic and underwear.

Will looks at him, low-lidded, his pale lips parted and his breathing heavy. "Please, Hannibal," he whispers, and reaches again. His hands find Hannibal's belt and pull it apart, letting it drop. His eyes have a ring in gold in them and he looks hungry – a different kind of hunger, not bloodlust or violence, but full of adoration and need.

He guides Hannibal to the bed and pushes him flat, over the blanket, and climbs atop him. He's hard, and Hannibal shivers, unable to deny his body's reaction as the heat of Will covers him so thoroughly. It is enchantment, it is madness, but Will grinds against him and is breathing raggedly, his lashes fluttering with pleasure, head tilted back to show his neck.

His chill hand wraps around both of them, stroking tightly enough that Hannibal's jaw clenches and he hisses, bucking up instinctively. His hands flatten on Will's thighs and grab tightly enough to leave bruises. The bruise on Will's thigh from the Rhine man's blow is almost completely gone and Hannibal marvels at its absence. The brand on his arm looks as old as Hannibal's. It should not be possible, and yet.

Will shivers, and sighs. "I can feel your ache," he whispers. "You ache like the Earth."

Will is wet from the rain, but drying quickly, and certainly not slick enough to penetrate. "I don't have any oil with me," Hannibal murmurs, a weak protest, as Will twists his wrist and puts lovely pressure at the head of his cock, gathering a little droplet of slick, which he brings to his mouth.

Will smiles, like this isn't any trouble. He spits on his palm and slicks his saliva over Hannibal's cock. Does it again, until Hannibal is wet. He rises to his knees, guiding Hannibal's cock between his legs.

"Will," Hannibal growls; a warning.

Will merely smiles, and sinks down with a sigh. He is tight, and burning hot on the inside, and Hannibal growls lowly at the feeling of sinking into him. Will goes slowly, but he goes, as determined as when he sets foot into the arena, as when he takes up his sword. He shivers, sweat breaking out on his forehead, a fine flush coloring his cheeks and chest, as he settles to the hilt, until the backs of his thighs touch Hannibal's hips.

He rolls his hips, growling low, and opens his eyes wide, staring down. He starts to move, and it's a rough slide, almost painful. Hannibal digs in with nails and watches as he rolls his entire body, clenching up tightly around Hannibal's cock.

"I love the feeling of you inside me," he whispers. "It satisfies me like nothing else. Not blood, not flesh." He trembles, and plants his hands on Hannibal's chest, rearing up and pushing back down with a soft snarl. "Feeling your desire, your *life*…"

Hannibal pushes himself upright, wrapping his arms around Will's back as Will moves. Will clutches at his shoulders with sharp claws, breath hitching as his cock ruts against Hannibal's stomach. His body tightens, spasms, as Hannibal hits that spot inside of him that makes his eyes flash gold.

"Hannibal," he breathes, and cups Hannibal's face, drawing him in for a kiss. Hannibal growls, and rolls them, planting Will on his back and fucking in deep, his hands going to behind Will's knees and folding him so he can fuck as deep as possible. Will cries out, his teeth clenched to stifle the sound, and he tugs at Hannibal's shoulders, flattens his hands on Hannibal's chest – he cannot decide, it seems, where he wants to touch most.

His heels dig into Hannibal's flanks, wanting him deeper, wanting more. Hannibal mounts him brutally, growling when the saliva runs dry and then it's just sweat, and then the scent of blood, but Will doesn't tell him to stop.

"Am I hurting you?" he asks, but there is something primal tugging in his chest, a beast barely leashed, fighting with all its might to run and bite.

Will shakes his head. "Don't stop," he begs, and claws at Hannibal's flanks, urging him on. "Fill me. *Please*."

Hannibal obeys with a weak moan, flattening over Will, his hands going to the blanket and fisting tight on either side of Will's head. Will wraps around him, kisses him as Hannibal fucks him, until the bed creaks in protest and the sound of Will's moans grows louder; encouraging, uninhibited. If any of the other men are awake, they will surely hear.

"Please, *please*," Will begs, as loud and brazen as any trained house slave. He is wet between his legs now, the scent of blood seeping like they are in the arena. Hannibal imagines fighting alongside Will, imagines killing a man and letting this creature eat his fill. Imagines fucking Will right there, in front of all the Romans and their gods, while the rain pours down around them and Will's cries echo louder than the thunder.

Will tenses, snapping his teeth together, and throws his head back, arching up sharply as he tightens and bears down, spilling so hot between their stomachs it feels like a new brand. He whimpers, clawing at Hannibal's back, at his flanks, his legs tight around Hannibal's waist.

Hannibal kisses him when he finishes, that same overpowering wave of pleasure coursing through him so that he keeps coming, fills Will so much that it leaks out around his cock. He goes still, pressed deep and Will is purring, utterly satisfied, his eyes glowing with gold as Hannibal sates his hunger.

It feels like it will never end, but end it does, and Hannibal pulls out and collapses at Will's side with a weak moan. Will smiles up at the ceiling, running his hand through the mess he left on his stomach and drinking his seed down.

Hannibal tilts his head. "Does your own seed nourish you?" he asks.

Will hums, and shrugs, turning to look at Hannibal. He is a creature sleek and shining with satisfaction, and he runs his fingers between his legs, brings back a mess both pink and white,

and licks his fingers clean again. "Not in the same way," he replies. "It is like eating grass compared to meat. There is satisfaction, but it does not fill me."

Hannibal hums, and cups Will's face, bringing him in for a kiss.

Will sighs into his mouth, sharing the taste of himself and Hannibal on his tongue. He brushes gentle knuckles down Hannibal's cheek and then, when they part, he huffs and shakes his head. "There is something I must tell you," he says.

"Oh?" Hannibal tilts his head.

Will nods, and brushes the corner of his mouth with his thumb. "The gods granted me a vision," he says. His brow creases. "I saw Margot married. I saw a child, but the child was a blur. His existence is not yet set in stone."

Hannibal frowns. "You promised her she would get her wish."

"I know," Will says, huffing in frustration. "And I know she will, but I do not think…. I do not think her wish was as simple as a husband, or a child. I think it was something more complicated."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know," Will says, shaking his head. "I have had few visions in my life. The first clear one was the one that brought me here – I saw myself on a ship, with slaves. I saw myself fighting in the arena. But this was…different." His frown deepens, and he falls back with a sigh. "There is something I haven't seen. Some branch of the gods' will that remains hidden to me."

"Margot hinted that she intends to seduce the Praetor," Hannibal suggests.

Will laughs at that. "That will do her no good," he says warmly. "There is no life in him."

"You can tell?"

"Of course," Will replies with a roll of his eyes. They have returned to blue now, glacial like ice over deep water. He smiles. "I can see it in every man and woman – I look at you and I see a rich feast. I look at the Praetor and I see…" He laughs again. "Grass."

Hannibal huffs. "And Margot?"

"Another rich feast," Will murmurs, low-lidded. He swallows and shifts his weight, wincing at the pull of tender muscle and Hannibal, unable to help himself, slides a hand to Will's thigh, massaging the yellowing edges of the bruise with gentle touches. "She will bear young, of that I am certain, but I'm starting to think that…"

He stops, and swallows, and his eyes dart to Hannibal. He turns, and cups Hannibal's face, his expression suddenly very serious.

"Do you believe in the will of the gods, Hannibal?"

"Truthfully, I did not, before I met you," Hannibal replies. "I cannot deny there is magic in you – through you, there must be some godly power wielded."

Will smiles at that, his expression soft. He leans in and kisses Hannibal again. "Then I simply ask for this; trust me. Margot's wish will come true. My…plans…will see the light. I sense they are all connected, somehow, though I'm not sure in what manner. I ask you to trust me."

Hannibal frowns, and swallows. "Whatever you desire, Will," he replies, and he means it. "I am your humble servant."

Will smiles, and kisses him again. "Not my servant," he breathes. "My friend."

Hannibal smiles. He quite likes the sound of that.

Chapter End Notes

such mystery~~~

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It stops raining on the third day. This is met equally with two opposing emotions: some of the men are relieved, being unfit for cold, wet weather, and are happy for the replenishment of the pools and the water supply but equally glad for the return of the sun. Others, the more suspicious and those from colder climates hold fear in their eyes, that there will be another great drought. It is these men, Hannibal notices, that have become more friendly with Will. Randall, for one, who sits next to Will during meals and trains with him when Hannibal is not there most days. Francis, while being a solitary creature by nature, seems similarly content to eat and rest on the outskirts of Will's small pack. Hannibal has often come down to the ludus after guarding Mason or Margot all morning, just past the hour when afternoon training begins, to find the three of them speaking to each other in the language of the Rhine.

The sky returns to a bright blue, untroubled by wisp of cloud nor strong breezes. Even the ever-present bite of the ocean wind seems to have gentled, spent and sated after the skies have been open for so long.

The days pass. Will trains, and grows stronger with each passing session. He feasts on organs and dead flesh when it's brought to him – people are eager, now, to bring sacrifices and gifts to the bringer of rains, and though it is mostly animal meat from what Hannibal can tell, and Will informs him. Word of Will's accomplishments have spread, and Hannibal does not deny himself the fierce flare of pride he feels whenever he sees Will overcome another man in the arena. Will is a fierce, determined fighter, and does not falter for wound, for weakness, never shows fear, never does anything but smile and eat and tell his spectators to rejoice.

His hair has grown longer, now, and is often wetted with blood or sweat, enough that he can push it back from his face and, in quieter moments, Hannibal can run his fingers through it, admiring the thickness of it. It is just long enough that he can see hints of the natural curl starting to form. His hair grows quickly – much more rapidly than his fellows – but Hannibal likes it. He likes petting Will, hearing him purr when the night is dark and everyone else is asleep. He likes the drag of it when it's wet, sliding through his fingers like silk. He cannot wait until it's long enough to fist and tug for real.

When they are not training, and Will is not fighting, and Hannibal is not attending to his other duties around the house, and when the sun has gone gentle and started to turn in for the night, Will goes to the cliffs and sings to the ocean. Hannibal joins him, as often as he can, for he finds a strange, delightful peace in listening to Will, and imagines the waves and the gulls and the breeze is chiming back to him in answer.

Tonight, though, he is not singing. Hannibal goes to him and sits beside him on the cliffs, and sees Will staring with a darkly contemplative look, his lips pressed together and a severe crease in his brow. He tilts his head when Will merely hums in acknowledgement of his presence, but does not press closer as he always has before. He reminds Hannibal of a

sunning cat, content to find warmth and strength in Hannibal's touch whenever they are together.

Hannibal lets him sit, and stare down at the dark, crashing waves. The stars shine brightly, uninhibited by cloud cover and by storms, though the ocean does not seem any less fierce for it. The water is higher, now – it is still a drop to certain death, but the waves crash up on the cliffs at a notably higher angle, and Hannibal can feel the slight tickle of salt spray on his feet as he swings his legs over the edge and settles.

Will sighs, and finally moves, the monument of stone cracking and turning. He gives Hannibal a small smile, puffing out a breath through his nose.

"Deep in thought?" Hannibal asks, and reaches out to pet down Will's arm. He has been given more clothes, the new favorite of Mason's, and is wearing a long tunic that goes to his knees, a faded purple color. It is by no means a fine robe, but it provides some respite from the cool air.

Will is tan, now, almost as dark as Hannibal's natural skin tone, and his flesh pebbles with goose bumps when Hannibal touches him.

Will nods, pulling one leg up so his heel is on the cliff, his cheek resting atop his knee, his arms wrapped around his shin, which is bruised from a particularly well-placed swipe from Randall with his wooden sword. His shoulder and flank have healed completely from the rain, and each wound is only a dark mesh of scar tissue now. The brand, too, seems faded, as though it has been there for years.

"I…have been having strange dreams," he says, and Hannibal tilts his head again, but smiles when Will leans into him, their shoulders brushing.

"More visions?" Hannibal asks.

Will frowns, pressing his lips together, and sighs through his nose again, righting his head so his chin is on his knee and his dark eyes are on the water – they are the same color, near-black. "Maybe," he says, and does not say anything else.

Hannibal lets him sit in silence for a long while, the wind and the water the only sounds to accompany them. Then; "Do these dreams trouble you?" he asks, finally, resting his hand on Will's flat thigh, which is the one closest to him. Will is tense beneath his touch, in a way he has never been before, as though anticipating pain. It makes Hannibal frown.

"They do not trouble me," Will says, in a way that suggests they should certainly trouble *someone*. He sighs again. "Has Mason come to you with any more designs regarding Margot's marriage, or breeding?"

Hannibal shakes his head.

"She will bleed again soon," Will adds. "If what the gods showed me is to pass, then whatever happens will happen in the next day or so. And this worries me, for I do not know what she asked for, but what I see isn't what I thought I would see."

Hannibal's frown deepens, and he squeezes Will's thigh. "Tell me, Will, what is it that you see?"

"I see a child," Will says. "He has formed himself in my dreams. But I do not know who his father is. And I see Margot married." His eyes flash to Hannibal, deep and dark, and then away again. "I see this happening soon."

"This troubles you deeply," Hannibal murmurs, and Will nods. "Why? Is it not what you had agreed to do? Is it not what she desires?"

Will's fingers flex around his shin, slide down to his ankle, then back up. His head dips, lips to his knee, and he regards Hannibal out of the corner of his eye. Something in him seems to shift, suddenly, for he unfolds and turns to Hannibal, cups his face and kisses him deeply. Hannibal sucks in a breath, startled but eager, and leans into Will, allowing Will to push him back so they are a safe distance from the cliffs, and Will straddles his thighs, the heat and softness of him an enticing pull to Hannibal's hands as they flatten around Will's waist.

Will kisses him with the fervor of a man in a blood-high, fresh from the arena. He is clean, cleansed by the rains and by the ocean spray, but Hannibal tastes blood in his mouth from his meal, senses an urgent hunger in Will as he rolls his hips and gasps against Hannibal's jaw.

Will dips his head, hands carding through Hannibal's hair, tightening around the nape of his neck. He puts his lips to Hannibal's ear and breathes; "Do you trust in my design?"

Hannibal frowns, distracted, confused, though he feels this is Will's intention. Still, he is helpless to resist the tides of him, pulled under and swept away as Will kisses him and presses him flat to his back in the sands.

"I trust you," Hannibal says, for it seems Will is waiting for an answer despite his attempts to silence Hannibal before he can ask questions, before he can argue. "Though -." Hannibal's jaw clenches, his lashes fluttering as Will grinds his hips, warm and sweet against Hannibal's cock as he hardens, helpless to resist Will. "Though I would prefer if you spoke to me plainly, about whatever these designs of yours are."

Will smiles at him, wide and beautiful, and leans down for another kiss. His entire body rolls, this time, coaxing like tidal waves, hand slipping down to fist in the sands on either side of Hannibal's head. His eyes glow with golden light, that fever-sweet hunger and Hannibal sees it, sees it and feels it echo in his own chest. He is, suddenly, ravenous for Will.

Will huffs, gasping as Hannibal surges up and rolls him onto his back. He has a small pouch of oil, which he takes with him now whenever he visits Will – after the second time he mounted Will, though Will had been eager and wanting at the time, he had moved with stiffness the next day, and Hannibal never wants to see him in pain that is not honorably won in the arena.

Will gazes up at him like Hannibal might be the god of the oceans himself, sleek and desperate, hips arching up as Hannibal tugs at the piece of cloth under his tunic, pulling it down to his knees and then freeing one leg. He has no thought in him to move to somewhere more private – there is something starving in his chest, something that wants the meat on

Will's tongue, wants the blood coating the inside of his lips. Wants the hot, viscerally satisfying feeling of Will tight around him, eager and as sweet as any well-bred woman.

"Please," Will whispers, pawing at Hannibal's robes below his belt, as Hannibal undoes the pouch and wets his fingers. He parts Hannibal's robes and there is something secretive and base in the way they fall together, like they are lovers stealing a quick moment; an affair, or something more primal than that. Hannibal thinks Will would shred their clothes to pieces and fuck like animals if he could.

Hannibal smiles, cups his head with one hand and kisses him, piercing Will's body with his wet fingers. Will trembles, desperate, his body knows this dance well now, has accepted some part of Hannibal inside of him almost every night. He parts easily, muscles sore but gracious, and Hannibal growls, forcing in two fingers, biting Will's lower lip when Will gasps.

"Fill me, *fill me*," Will demands, clawing at Hannibal's shoulders. His thighs part, cage his hips in, and he digs in with his heels and his nails as Hannibal pulls his fingers out and spreads the rest of the oil on his cock. He fits his hands behind Will's knees and forces him to fold, and the sand is much less easy to brace against than Will's cot. One of Will's arms lifts, fist in the sand, nails dug into the wet dirt beneath, and he throws his head back and cries out as Hannibal pierces him and sinks in deeply in one, smooth thrust.

Hannibal prowls over him, forcing him into the sand as he fucks in with a grunt, his mouth finding Will's neck and biting down. Will snarls, his free hand in Hannibal's hair now, clinging tight, begging Hannibal to suckle and nurse at his sweat-damp flesh. There is a fine pink to his face and neck, spreading down his chest to where the tunic lies, and Will moans, loudly, hissing as Hannibal sinks as deep into him as he can. He relishes the tight, hot slick of Will, the strength in him trembling and trying to lie still and lax under Hannibal's hands, under his weight.

Above them, there is a drop in the air, a soft roll of distant thunder, and Hannibal huffs, tilts his head and catches Will's mouth in a passionate kiss.

"More rain?" he asks.

Will shivers, tilts his head back and blinks, dazed, up at the sky. He moans and arches as Hannibal wipes one hand on their clothes, freeing his palm from grit and sand, and wraps it around Will's cock. "*Yes*," he whimpers, and then his hands move, pulling at Hannibal's robes until the brand on his spine is bared to the sky. Then, he takes Hannibal's free hand and laces their fingers together, planting them on the sand. "Do you feel her, Hannibal? Do you feel her aching?"

And Hannibal thinks he might. There is a strange fervency in the air, as though a great bird is fluttering its wings against the bars of a cage. It is incensing; drives his knees into the ground so that he can fuck Will harder, quickens his hand as Will tightens for him.

The ground feels warm.

Hannibal snarls, bowing his head as Will shivers, clenching up tightly around his cock, and all of Will is burning as brightly as white fire, his eyes glowing golden when Hannibal kisses

him. His lashes flutter and he gasps, arching up again, against Hannibal's weight and his strength. He comes with a soft groan, muted by Hannibal's mouth, staining their clothes as he fills the space between their bellies with his seed.

Hannibal snarls, eyes closing at the feeling. He has quickly become addicted to the feeling of Will's pleasure around him. Then, a single icy drop of rain hits his shoulder, and he gasps.

"Don't stop," Will begs, freeing both hands and digging them into the small of Hannibal's back and Hannibal rears up over him, plants his hands behind Will's knees again and folds him, flattens him to the ground. It lifts Will's hips, makes Hannibal fuck deeper and it feels *glorious*, feels like the sweetest victory to open his eyes and see Will's, dark and glazed and fixed on him. "Please. *Please*."

Hannibal nods, for he cannot form words. He's close, and as he moves, more rain falls, wetting his hair and turning the sand beneath them thick and dark, clumping under their muscles. He leans down again and kisses Will harshly, licks between his teeth, and Will trembles for him, lets out a sweet, wanton moan, and slides his hands up to cover Hannibal's brand.

Rainwater pools there, warmed by Will's hands, and Will rears up, kisses lightly at Hannibal's neck, licks the water from his red flesh.

"Say that you're mine," Will demands, breathless and raw.

Hannibal cannot resist. Doesn't want to resist – he has been Will's, he thinks, from the moment their eyes locked on the docks. The moment Will showed his teeth and garnered his imprisonment here at Mason's ludus.

"'Is leatsa mé'," Will snarls. "Say it."

Hannibal does, repeats it like a mantra, and Will sighs, the sound utterly satisfied. He smiles and parts his jaws around Hannibal's pulse, licks along the flexed tendon, over where his heart rushes strongest.

"Is liomsa thú," Will whispers. "And I'm yours."

Hannibal nods, clenches his fingers in Will's thighs. Bares his teeth as the rain starts to plummet around them in earnest, covering the rush of the waves, the rumble of thunder.

Will is purring, fine and proud beneath him, and then his teeth dig into Hannibal's neck – sharp, so blessedly sharp – and sink down. The knife-draw of pain and the sudden, thick spill of Hannibal's blood is all it takes. Hannibal goes still, and finishes with a rough growl, fucking into Will as deeply as he can as Will drinks from his neck.

Will shivers, tense and flexing as Hannibal fills him and feeds him. He licks over the bite mark, ekes out more warm blood, and Hannibal snarls, turns his head, and bites Will in turn. It feels right to do it, and feeding Will always brings a height of pleasure he has never known – magic, he's sure, evolved in Will to be sure his food source is always willing to come back – but the taste of his blood refines it, turns the precious stones into diamond. Hannibal's eyes

white out with pleasure, he fucks in and in and keeps moving, lets Will drink and drink, lets his body soak into all that Hannibal has to offer, and the taste of his blood is sweeter than any wine, more satisfying than any meat. He finds himself rabid with the need to bite down harder, to consume Will in his entirety.

Will moans, eager and pleased, and pulls his mouth from Hannibal's neck with one last lick. The moment he does, the connection is severed, and Hannibal gasps, collapsing over Will. He frees Will's legs, wraps his arms instead underneath Will's shoulders and clings to him, every muscle in him twitching like a body in death throes, unwilling to go still quite yet.

When he manages to lift his head, the rain is still coming down, hard and cold, but Hannibal burns.

Will's eyes are a bright, blistering gold, the rival of any Roman jewel, and he smiles.

There is blood in his mouth, blood in Will's. Hannibal cups his face and kisses him deeply, his cock slipping out of Will's heat as Will rolls and shifts his weight, sighing in pleasure against Hannibal's slack kiss.

Hannibal pulls back from him, just long enough for them to adjust their clothing. He pulls Will to his feet and Will collapses against his chest, purring in pleasure and nuzzling his bitten neck. Hannibal winces, though the pain is dull – he suspects already healing under the fall of the rain. He thumbs at the bite he laid to Will's neck and Will shivers, lashes low over his golden eyes.

Then, he turns, and lifts his face to look upon the balcony. Hannibal follows his gaze and finds it empty, and his brow furrows when Will sighs, and turns into him again, kissing chastely at his neck.

"Was someone there?" he asks.

Will lifts one shoulder, sighs again, and cups Hannibal's jaw. "No," he murmurs, and kisses Hannibal, gently, but with passion. His eyes are still glowing that sated golden color, and he is so beautiful, so supremely lovely to look at like this, wetted with rain, pink with desire.

Will smiles. "Will you stay with me tonight?" he asks.

Hannibal nods, wrapping Will up tightly as they seek shelter from the rain. "For a while," he replies. "Mason has an early meeting with the Praetor, so I must be gone before sunrise."

Will nods, accepting that with a hum. They go to his bed and shed their wet clothes, wrapping up tight under Will's blanket and each other. Heavy with satisfaction and with the soft lull of the rain falling around them, they drift off to sleep quickly.

Hannibal returns to his quarters just past midnight, parting with one more kiss from Will before he redresses and heads back up to the villa. When morning comes, he is roused by a

swift knock on the door. He rises and answers to see Alana, and her eyes are wide, her hands wrung together nervously.

"Mason is asking for you," she says quickly, and takes him by the wrist. Her eyes drop to Hannibal's neck, and widen further. "What in the name of -?"

Hannibal smiles, and shrugs. "Will," he replies.

Her eyes lift to his, and she looks over her shoulder. "You should cover that," she says, soft and urgent. Hannibal nods, and pulls a cloak over his shoulders, fastening it over his robes. It is still raining, and quite cold, so he will be able to excuse the extra garment.

He follows her to Mason's quarters and finds the man in his bath, naked and pink like a newborn pig. "You called for me, dominus?" he asks, coming to a stop at the threshold, his hands behind his back.

Mason looks at him, his eyes narrowed. He purses his lips and gestures for Hannibal to approach. "Yes," he says softly, lacking his normally obnoxious volume. "Come, my old friend, come closer."

Hannibal nods, and obeys, until he is just at the lip of the bath, which is laid into the floor. The scent of the water is richly floral, and he swallows and tries to breathe through his nose, carefully keeping his eyes on Mason's face and not the bare spread of him.

Mason tilts his head, considering Hannibal in silence. There is something sharp and feral in his eyes that reminds Hannibal of starved slaves. Then, he smiles. "I have been thinking, my old friend," he says slowly. "About what you said. Regarding Margot."

Hannibal tilts his head.

"I have decided what would please me most. You were right – I would not be happy handing her to just any man. Our bloodline is a pure stock and those simpering cows in Rome, well, I would never let their waif-like hands touch her. She needs someone strong! Someone that would mount her properly, you see."

Hannibal nods, keeping his expression carefully impassive.

"I have been speaking with the Praetor, and we have discussed many things. My father, great man that he was, wasn't *ambitious*, you understand. He contented himself with his pigs and his dogs, and he raised many fine champions, but *Rome* where the money truly is." Mason smiles, flapping his fingers against the top of the water.

Hannibal tilts his head. "Forgive me, dominus, I fail to see where these two things connect."

Mason smiles at him, this wide and predatory thing. "I would like to visit Rome," he says slowly, head tilted like a bird with a broken neck. "And I would like to bring Margot with me. But she is a wild mare, you see, Hannibal. She cannot be allowed loose in their pastures, where any stallion might see and mount her against her will."

Hannibal swallows.

"It has been a trouble that has plagued me for many nights," Mason says. He stands, dripping with water, and a house slave comes forward with a robe for him. He steps out the bath, securing a belt around his waist, and grins at Hannibal. "I am deeply concerned that my sister finds a worthy man."

"A sentiment you and I share," Hannibal says quietly.

Mason crows with delight, clapping his hands together. "And I have been blessed, old friend!" he says loudly, and grabs a cup of wine when offered by the same slave. He glares at the slave and dismisses him with a wave of his hand. "I was wandering the halls, late last night, praying for a vision from the gods, and I see they have brought me answer!"

Hannibal frowns, his fingers clenching behind his back. "Dominus, please, have mercy on my nerves," he says, and though the tone is teasing, a soft fissure of distress shifts in his gut.

Mason grins at him. "Why, Hannibal, surely you jest," he says. He turns, facing Hannibal fully, and gestures to him with his wine glass. "There is already a fine, strong man in my service, whom I know would never let my beloved sister come to harm, and is happily unmarried!"

Hannibal frowns, and tilts his head. His knuckles go white.

"I saw a strange thing, last night," Mason says. "I saw this fine man, so clearly unhappy with his solitary life that he has chosen the company of my *champion*." That fissure of discomfort grows claws, and Hannibal swallows harshly. "Clearly, he is in dire need of a woman, and I can think of no man who has proven himself more worthy to wed and bed my dear sister!"

Hannibal's breath catches, and he blinks. "Dominus -."

"No," Mason says, sharply, and shakes his head. He smiles. "No more 'dominus', my old friend. I insist you call me brother!"

Hannibal can hardly believe what he is hearing. "You…wish to give your sister to me, as my wife," he says slowly.

Mason nods. "A rather elegant arrangement, wouldn't you say?" he asks, and takes a long drink of his wine. "It is a solution that ensures the strength of this ludus, the union of my family, and means my beloved sister and dear friend will never be parted from me."

Hannibal swallows harshly, and breathes out. He thinks of Will, how Will had so eagerly awakened that hunger in him last night, of his promise to find Margot a man, of his assurance that Margot would be married and mother a child. He doesn't know if Will knew, but can think of no other alternative.

He thinks of Will's possessiveness, his magic last night, and is certain Will knew.

He lifts his chin. "You honor me, Mason," he says, for he cannot refuse. It is, he knows, a generous offer, to give someone like Margot to a former slave, and no reasonable man could

deny the offer, and he would not risk incurring Mason's wrath. Not if he knows about Will. "Does Margot know?"

Mason grins at him. "Oh, not yet," he says with another dismissive wave. "I shall tell her over breakfast. I think she will be thrilled! She is very fond of you, and I know you will breed her well."

Hannibal's nostrils flare, and he resists the urge to snarl. Anger, hot and blinding, is rising up behind his discomfort, both for Margot's sake, and at Mason that he still believes he can trade his sister and Hannibal like breeding dogs.

And, at Will, for if Will knew, he didn't say anything. Hannibal thinks of how he'd looked, discussing his vision of Margot's husband. If he'd seen Hannibal in that vision, and said nothing, then he must expect Hannibal to father a child with her as well. It is outrage, and visceral anger, and yet he dares not move, nor show it.

Mason is still smiling, and Hannibal bows his head in a deferential nod. "I will do my best to be a good husband to her," he says.

Mason laughs in delight, and finishes his wine before he sets the cup down. He comes to Hannibal and places one hand on each shoulder, squeezing tightly. "And I, a good brother to you," he says. "When you are married and have planted a babe in her, we shall all go to Rome and begin the expansion of the great Verger line. Rejoice, Hannibal, that you get to have a part in it."

Hannibal nods again, and Mason releases him. Hannibal leaves, a dark anger swirling in his stomach. He finds Alana in the entrance to the kitchens, carrying a plate of steaming boar cuts, and another of sweet figs.

"Hannibal," she says, blinking in the face of his dark expression. "Are you alright?"

"Did you know?" he demands.

She frowns. "Know what?"

Hannibal shakes his head, takes a deep breath. She does not deserve his wrath. "When breakfast is over, please bring Margot down to the ludus," he tells her. "I sense she will want words with me."

Alana's frown deepens, but she nods, and scurries away. Hannibal can hear, distantly, the sounds of the men training. He does not know what he will do, when he sees Will again, but he cannot avoid the man. If Will knows anything of what is happening, Hannibal would have words with him, too.

He sheds his cloak and leaves it in his rooms, and heads down to the ludus. It is time he and Will learned how to speak plainly to each other.

Chapter End Notes

~~~dramaaaa
also, if it wasn't clear, Will said "You're mine" and "I am yours".
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Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> gosh I am SO sorry this took so long ahhhh please forgive me and enjoy the emotions and intrigue!

The trek down to the ludus, short as it is, has done nothing to quell the riotous, unnerved anger sitting in Hannibal's stomach. His questions have teeth and claws, snarl and pace in his head like a pack of wild dogs, snapping at his heels, compelling him onward, faster. His hands burn, his mouth burns like Will has branded him and he needs to know, he needs to understand why, if Will saw this future, he did not share it.

He enters the ludus, locking the door behind him, and finds Will in spar with Francis and Randall, the three of them lunging and parrying each other equally. Francis has greater reach, but Will is nimble and strong, and Randall has dogged determination on his side. Hannibal pauses, still in the shade beneath the balcony, and he watches them, grunting and colliding with hard knocks of their wooden swords and swift blows made by foot and fist.

Will is well-fed, shining brilliantly despite the lingering storm clouds from his rains the night before. The burst this time was shorter, the ground now moist and moving beneath heels and hands, and Hannibal knows it will put greater strain on a man's thighs, his ankles, his knees, to keep balance while fighting on shifting ground.

He watches, watches Will's slick hair plaster to his temples, neck, and forehead with sweat. Watches the show of his teeth, savage and rough as he kicks at Randall's chest, sending him sprawling back, only for Francis to come at him from behind and knee at his thigh, heel behind his knee, forcing him to the ground. One of Francis' long, muscled arms wraps around Will's neck and yanks him into a chokehold.

Will snarls, and lifts his eyes, and his gaze locks with Hannibal's.

The sight of him is like a blow, and Hannibal feels the pack of dogs in his head snap, snarl, and lunge. He straightens up and steps out onto the sands and Francis looks up, releasing Will immediately – everyone knows Will is Hannibal's, to train and fight with.

Hannibal gives Francis a nod of thanks, and then Randall stands and they pair off. Will is still on his knees, panting, looking up at Hannibal with eyes the same color as the storm clouds, grey and heavy, his pupils wide. Hannibal forces himself not to be stirred at the sight, for Will on his knees has never been anything but pleasurable until this moment.

Will licks his lips and wipes the back of his wrist along the corner of his mouth, where there is a droplet of blood pooled there from the edge of Randall's knuckles. Otherwise, he does not

move, and neither does Hannibal, and the sounds of the ludus around them fade, like they are cocooned in something secret and separate from everything else.

Hannibal sucks in a breath, deep, through his nose, and lets it out, his arms folded behind his back. "Did you know?" he asks.

Will's tongue slips out, wetting his lower lip. His shoulders hunch in and his fingers wrap up tightly as dead spiders, and Hannibal thinks of how tense he had been the night before and another heavy stone of dread and uncertain anger sits in his stomach. If he is not careful, he will get too full, and all that will spill from his mouth is bile.

Will swallows, drops his gaze and Hannibal snarls, takes the single step forward that closes the distance, grabs Will's throat and forces his head to lift. "Not this time," he says, harshly, commanding, no room for argument. "Show me your neck and look me in the eye before you lie to me."

Will's neck flexes, strained and bruising under his tight grip. He winces, but lets Hannibal grab him, lets Hannibal hurt him, until the burn of Will's skin is too much and he lets go and straightens. Will's expression is one of great sorrow, the same kind Hannibal imagines winter feels when she kills all of her cousin's green plants.

"I saw a man," he says. "Not his face, but I knew by his hair, by his back, by his bearing. Yes, I knew."

Hannibal stares at him. Merely stares, and stares. He rubs a hand over his mouth, down his neck and winces when he feels the raised edges of Will's bite. Will's neck is similarly injured, a bruise stretching from under his jaw to the top of his collarbone.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he breathes.

Will flinches from him, shoulders sagging, and lowers his head in something like a bow. His gaze slants, and Hannibal knows from looking at him that he will not answer. Not willingly. He growls, yanks Will's sword away and tosses it to the shaded walkway, and hauls Will up to his feet.

He leaves Will, and approaches one of the guards. "Give me your sword," he demands, and the guard blinks at him, uneasy, but obeys. Hannibal takes it with a nod, crosses back to Will, who is standing and regarding him with wary eyes. Hannibal points the tip of the sword to Will's discarded wooden one. "Pick it up."

Will doesn't protest, doesn't hesitate. He walks to his wooden sword and picks it up, and they move to the edge of the sands, where the cliffs are, where they normally train. Will looks resigned, exhausted, suddenly, and slides gracefully into his ready stance, his sword flipped in his hand and laid backwards against his forearm.

Hannibal snarls, and lunges for him, metal glinting in the soft clouded light, aimed to Will's neck. Will ducks, parries the swing so Hannibal spins all the way around in a swirl of robes, and Will leaps for him, trying to jab his sword up under Hannibal's arm. But it is a move well-known to Hannibal, now. Will has his own kind of strategy. He aims for where the

arteries carry the most blood – and he would know, given his diet, which part of a man smelled most nourishing – and if he cannot do that, he will try and disarm his opponent to make it safe for his teeth.

Hannibal knows this, so he knows Will intends to do it, and he wraps a hand in Will's hair, yanks his head back and slides the flat of his blade between Will's thighs. Will goes still, panting, his eyes wide as Hannibal looks down between them. He purses his lips, tips his sword sideways, watches the sharp edge bite and draw blood, following the tense line of muscle on the top of his thigh, under the cover of his tunic. It is not a fatal wound, but he knows it hurts.

Will whimpers, the same sound a dog might make when receiving a blow from a master that has only ever been kind, and then his sword comes down, knocking Hannibal's wrist, pushing him away. Hannibal lets his hair go and Will staggers back, limping as he compensates for his injured leg.

He reaches down with his free hand, flattens it over the cut, smears his fingers with red and looks at them, then at Hannibal. "So," he says quietly, "will I pay for this betrayal with blood?"

"Have you betrayed me?" Hannibal demands, though it certainly feels that way – the molten anger in his chest has formed collars around his dogs, and they are all burning and howling and rabid with the desire to attack. Hannibal strides forward and swings for Will again, in the flank this time, and Will grits his teeth and fits his forearm behind his sword, stopping the blade with the thick wooden shaft. It gets stuck, and Hannibal snarls and yanks the sword out of Will's hand.

He puts the wooden sword beneath his foot and tugs his blade free, and Will swallows, but does not kneel, and does not try to flee. He stands, shaking, blood running down his leg like a woman's stain, and Hannibal raises his sword and puts it under Will's chin, forcing his head up.

"Will you yield?" he asks. Will turns his head away and doesn't answer. "No, of course you won't." Will licks his lips. "Would you call for your gods, if I were to cut your neck right now? Would the rain heal you then?"

Will's fingers curl at his sides, one hand bloody, the other clean. His eyes are on the ocean. "I can die," he whispers, barely audible over the waves and the wind. Still, he doesn't look at Hannibal, and the absence of his gaze hurts almost as much as the anger. "You might bleed me dry, might fling me from these cliffs, might tear me limb from limb or gut me, and I would die."

Hannibal presses his lips together, and lowers the sword. He steps close and Will quivers, dips his chin, lashes low. "You saw my marriage to Margot," he says, and Will's brow creases, the corners of his mouth turning down. He breathes in, and nods. "And…is there still a child?"

Will breathes out, and lifts his eyes, and Hannibal finally sees that the shine is not gold, it is not a reflection of the sun – it is water. Great, unfathomable grief, and pain, and the same

kind of desperation that made him cling to Hannibal and demand he call himself Will's.

"I don't want to look," he confesses, and lets out a shaky noise, lifts his hands and presses the heels of them into his eyes. One of them leaves behind a smear of blood from his thigh. "It's –. I don't want to look. It's getting harder and harder to make myself. I can't bear it."

Above them, far away, there is a hollow rumble of thunder and Will's face is pale, now, his voice tight from trying to hold back his tears. He swipes his hands down his face, cupping them over his mouth, and the blood on his fingers makes it look like he's crying red.

His shoulders tremble, roll in, and he drags his hands down his chin and lets them drop in a move so utterly helpless that it's all Hannibal can do not to embrace him on the spot. He drops his sword, tosses it to land beside Will's, and reaches for him. Will does not flinch, but he doesn't lean in either, neither seeking comfort nor accepting it.

It is the first time he has seen Will's sorrow. He has borne witness to Will's joy, brilliant like lightning strikes; he has seen Will's contemplative quiet, heard his songs to the sea, felt the calm magic of him that was like inevitability and tidal waves; he has shared in Will's desire, felt the burn of him and bathed in his rain.

This is something entirely other, something he has no idea how to heal, how to help. Will blinks at him with wet, wild eyes, and shudders as Hannibal's hand cups his jaw. He tilts his head, shows his neck, meets Hannibal's gaze.

"I didn't want you to feel as I feel," he says, so quiet Hannibal must lean in very close to hear him. "And I didn't…want to know, if your desires and mine were not the same."

Hannibal frowns. "How so?"

Will breathes in, lifts his chin. The smear of blood on his face is dry, but his leg is wet. "If you desire Margot, and wish to marry and breed her, then -."

Hannibal doesn't let him finish. Men be damned, Mason be damned, the gods themselves be damned. He slides his hand to the back of Will's neck and tugs him forward, until their mouths collide with Will's gasp and a clack of teeth, before Will tilts his head, eager, searching, and parts for him. He grabs at Hannibal's clothes, works his knuckles tight into the fabric, and shudders when Hannibal growls and bites his lower lip, his other hand coming up and flattening, irrefutable, over the bite mark he placed to Will's neck.

He pulls back, their foreheads touching. "I am yours," he says, and Will's exhale is a weak, ragged noise. Relieved. Grieving. "And you are mine."

Will nods, tugs at him, butts his forehead to Hannibal's like a nuzzling dog. "Yes, *yes*," he breathes. He pulls back so Hannibal can see his eyes, see them glowing with something fierce, now, something that pushes at the borders of his irises and colors them gold. His gaze lifts, to the balcony, a flash of something dark and angry crossing his face.

"How can these two things be?" he asks, and lets go of Hannibal, and tilts his head. His eyes return, and Hannibal drops his gaze to Will's injured leg, finds it clotting, blood turning

brown as it dries. "How are you mine, and also hers?"

Hannibal scowls, and goes to the two swords, picking them up. "Mason," he says, and that is all he says.

Will is silent, contemplative, until Hannibal returns after giving the guard his sword back – a man with wide eyes after having witnessed Hannibal use it – and the wooden one to the slave boy. Will's eyes are on the sea, and Hannibal goes to the medical room, retrieves a spare piece of cloth and the healing salve – unnecessary, he's sure, but it will make him feel better to see it done – and returns to Will.

He gestures for Will to sit, and kneels down beside him, binding his wound carefully.

Will hums, and lifts his chin. "Can a man command another man to marry?" he asks.

Hannibal sighs. "It's…" There is no right word. "Complicated."

Will tilts his head, considering this, and lifts his eyes. He sighs. "It will rain again tonight," he says, and looks out to the horizon of the ocean, where the blues mesh together and there is a thin streak of white from the glittering reflection of the sun off the water. There are storm clouds above the city, a little way away, slowly drifting closer like the roll of a lazy cat.

Hannibal huffs. "Do the gods in the rain mean to drown us?"

Will laughs, and it is such a sweet relief to hear him do so. "The gods have desires just as we do," he says, and sits up once Hannibal is finished. He reaches out, touches Hannibal's bare shoulder. Squeezes, briefly. "They want to touch, and kiss, and hold us just as we hold each other. Can you fault them for wanting to shower down on such eager ones as we are?"

Hannibal presses his lips together, and frowns, for he does not understand.

Before he can reply, Will's gaze shifts away from him, towards the balcony again, and Hannibal looks over his shoulder to see Margot and Alana standing there, gazing down at them. Hannibal stands, and hauls Will to his feet. Alana's eyes drop to the blood staining Will's face and leg, and her eyes widen.

"Hannibal," Margot calls. She appears shaken and pale, fragile as a springtime rosebud. "I would have words with you."

Hannibal bows his head, and looks back to Will. He feels that this is something all three of them would better have together, but he cannot bring Will up to the villa, and Margot certainly should not come down here during training hours.

Will's eyes snap up, and widen. He blows out a heavy lungful of air, and Hannibal blinks, eyes widening, for a mask of anger has slipped over Will's face, and he rubs his blood-stained hand over his mouth again, turning away from Hannibal and the women sharply.

"Will?" Hannibal says.

Will mutters something dark under his breath, and spits into the ocean. He turns towards Hannibal, grips his arm fiercely and leans in.

"She must conceive an heir immediately."

Hannibal blinks, and tilts his head. "Why?"

"Because I will slaughter her brother, I swear on every god in every religion that I will do it. And I will do it soon."

Hannibal growls, hauling Will closer and putting his teeth to Will's ear. "Silence these thoughts," he demands, as while he doesn't know the origin of them, nor their sudden ferocity, he knows that Will should not be speaking so plainly out in the open where anyone might hear him. "The walls have ears in this place."

Will snarls, showing his teeth, and yanks his arm free, stepping back so Hannibal cannot grab at him. He looks up again and Hannibal follows his gaze, finds that both women are still there, watching them. Margot looks like she is trying desperately to maintain her calm and decorum, as any well-bred Roman woman might. Alana, beside her, appears pale and withdrawn, nervous almost, so unlike how Hannibal normally sees her.

He wonders what Will sees. Wonders, again, if Will would tell him, or shield him from another unhappy observation for the sake of Hannibal's emotions.

He looks at Will. "This conversation isn't over," he says sternly. Will's eyes snap to him, and flash, but he nods. Then, Hannibal turns away from him and goes through the ludus gates, up the stairs and into the hallway that connects stairwell to villa.

He finds Margot and Alana in the room where the siblings commonly eat breakfast, Margot sitting on that same light blue couch, Alana beside her. Opposite them, on the other side of the low, dark wooden table, is another couch colored gold. Hannibal hesitates at the threshold, just long enough for Margot to lift her head and meet his eyes.

He sighs, inwardly, and comes to sit on the opposite couch. He folds his hands between his knees, elbows on his thighs, and settles. Since she was a child, he has known her and her brother, and guarded them since he earned his freedom years ago, and now…this. He winces, and wonders if she would even believe him if he told her this is not what he desires.

He looks at her, meets her glassy, wide eyes, and presses his lips together. "I presume Mason has told you the…happy news."

She swallows, decorum remembered, though there is a small jilt in her knee and a fidgety quality to her fingers where they rest in her lap. "Very happy news," she says quietly, and Hannibal tilts his head. Sitting with her feels like fighting Will does – it is a dance, but the movements are stiff, and the dancers here are subtly off-rhythm. They can improve, and become harmonious, but Hannibal is cautious, and Margot is timid.

She clears her throat and pets down the front of her dress. "I imagine Mason will already be overseeing preparations," she says, and forces a smile. "He seems eager to see us married."

"Yes," Hannibal says quietly, with a single nod. His eyes shift to Alana, see her staring at her mistress' hands, her own curled in her dress like she wants to soothe. As Margot's husband, Hannibal will be given command of Alana as well, able to order her around and take his liberties with her body if he chooses, under the law. The very thought of it sickens him.

He sighs, and Margot looks at him. "I confess, it will be an interesting change of pace, not to call you 'domina'."

His attempt at lightness works – she smiles, her eyes flashing with brief mirth. "You can still call me that if you wish," she replies with a playful huff. "In private, at least."

There is a heartbeat, before the air goes sour, both their thoughts turning to what 'private' things may also entail.

Hannibal looks down at his hands, sees that his fingertips are smeared with Will's blood. His fingers curl and he looks away. "Margot," he begins, and feels her attention on him, "is this what you asked for? When you came to Will?"

He sees her shake her head in his periphery, looks to her and sees her eyes wet. "Not exactly," she replies unsteadily, dabbing below her cheeks. "But I will confess something to you, Hannibal, if I may."

"Please," he murmurs. "Speak freely. Know that you may always speak freely with me."

She gives him a faint, watery smile. "Although I will admit this turn of events has shocked me, and is not what I anticipated even from my brother, I cannot deny that you are a trusted, loyal, and devoted friend. I am lucky to know you, and I know that if you are half as good a husband as you are a guardian, I am truly blessed."

At this, Alana nods, almost absently, but in agreement. Hannibal's stomach clenches up tightly. Her words are gracious, but placative, as though she is trying to croon to a snarling wolf. Hannibal may be kind to her, and to Alana, but he is a beast of the arena and always will be.

He wonders if she even remembers seeing him fight. If she smells the blood and sweat that clings to his skin. If she has seen Will's stain on him and knows he is violent.

He swallows, and dips his chin in a demure nod. "You honor me, Margot," he murmurs. "And I want you to know that my single purpose in this life, from the moment we marry, will be to make you happy and see you satisfied in all things."

She smiles at him, grateful and sweet, and wipes at her face.

"But," Hannibal adds, and stands, "I believe we should speak to Will. There are things that demand explanation – something only he is capable of showing us."

He looks to Alana when he says this, and she blinks at him, wide-eyed. There is something sharp in her eyes, a defensive, inward curl to her shoulders, and Hannibal does not know

what she is hiding, or what Margot might be hiding, but it was enough for Will to throw away all sense of secrecy and caution and openly threaten his master.

That is something worth talking about.

Margot nods, pushing herself to her feet as well, Alana following suit. "Do you think we could bring him to the villa?" she asks, and looks between Alana and Hannibal – they, of course, know the comings and goings of the house servants and the best ways to move around unseen. "I believe Mason will be with the Praetor and lady Bedelia tonight."

Hannibal considers this. If that is the case, then the villa will be largely unattended. But there are more places for unfriendly eyes and ears to hide up here.

"No," he finally decides. "The ludus is safer, and there will be less chance of being overheard by anyone with…skewed loyalties."

Margot frowns at him – not in anger, or defiance, merely confusion and wariness. She worries her lower lip and nods, absently petting over the front of her neck in a nervous gesture. "Tonight, then. When my brother leaves, Alana and I will come down."

Hannibal nods. "Will told me it will rain tonight," he replies. "I will be down with him. We often sit by the cliffs; we will see you coming."

Margot nods, and smiles, placing a hand on Hannibal's shoulder in a soft touch. "Thank you, Hannibal," she says, heavy with sincerity. "You are a dear, dear friend to me, and I wish every blessing in the world on you."

"And to you, domina," he replies, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles. They laugh, and share a playful set of exasperated smiles. Alana still looks subdued, deeply troubled, and Hannibal doesn't know why but he hopes Will might be able to shed some light on it.

"I will see you both tonight," he says, and takes his leave, heading back down to the ludus. After all, he must be sure to maintain appearances, and there is still training to be done if Will is to continue earning his meals.

Chapter 13

By the end of the training day, Will is exhausted, dark circles beneath his eyes and sweat coating him like a second skin. He can barely put weight on the leg Hannibal injured, and Hannibal swallows, regret deep in his chest as he gathers Will's sword and returns their training weapons to the slave boy to be put away.

When he returns, Will is at the cliffs, curled up tightly on himself, his heels at the edge of it. The air is heavy and warm with the pending rain, the clouds sweeping in from the city and coloring the sky darkly enough that the setting sun gives its light over quickly and sinks below the horizon.

He sits, and Will looks at him through heavy eyes. Hannibal reaches for him, hesitates, then flattens his hand over Will's uninjured thigh and squeezes gently.

"I deeply regret my treatment of you," he says.

Will shrugs one shoulder, sighs, and looks away. "You were angry," he murmurs, then his lips quirk. "Boorish."

Hannibal huffs a laugh. "Still. I should know better by now, when it comes to you." Will hums and looks to him again. "You bring out a great passion in me; a frantic recklessness that I am helpless to resist."

Will sighs, very heavily. His eyes are on the steady waves, and for the first time Hannibal sees a strange vulnerability in his face, a wistfulness as he looks out and clenches his fists against his shins.

"I want to go home," he whispers. Hannibal's chest clenches up sharply, hard enough that he feels his heart beat behind his ribs. "I miss the color of the grass, the song of the trees. I miss the rivers, and the shine of fish within them." He trembles, and closes his eyes. "Do you miss your homeland, Hannibal?"

"Every day," Hannibal replies, "though it is a distant thought most of the time. There is nothing for me, there, nothing to call me back except pain and dark memory."

Will nods, once, and lifts his hands to his face. There is still a smear of his blood on his cheek, though it has been sweated down to a fine pink sheen. He wraps his hands over his mouth and sobs, trembling, and Hannibal aches to soothe him but he does not know how.

He takes his hand from Will's thigh, rubs it down his back instead. "Tell me about your home," he says.

Will's fingers curl, revealing bared teeth. "It was…beautiful," he whispers. "Hills and mountains as far as the eye could see. A forest you could get lost in, rich with animals and flowers." He opens his eyes, glistening with tears, and looks out to the ocean again. "There was a beach, covered with black slate that would wash in. We used it to make weapons and

build houses. I -." He coughs, and swallows. "My mother would take me there, and some of the stones had imprints of ocean creatures in them. We would collect them."

Hannibal smiles; the idea of having a collection of anything is a distant, childish thought, but it stirs something in him all the same.

"My sister was similar," he murmurs. Will blinks, and looks at him, face pale in the rising glow of the moon. "She would collect pretty stones she would find in the lakebed near our castle and bring me the ones she thought I would like."

There was one such, that was a brilliant blue and glistened darkly when held up to the sun. It was, Hannibal thinks, a similar likeness to Will's eyes, ever-shifting and not quite one color. Will swallows, and looks over his shoulder, towards the dark shapes of the other men as they take their evening meal and settle down for the night.

"Do you think…?" He stops, swallowing again, the bite on his throat standing out starkly. "Do you think Margot and Alana would like it there?"

Hannibal tilts his head, frowning. His hand stills in petting Will's back, and he pulls his touch away. "Why do you ask?"

"We must go somewhere, when I do what I came here to do."

"And what is it, that you came here to do?" Hannibal asks. "You have told me you meant to eat, and to help with the rains. Now I sense your thoughts have turned somewhat darker."

Will does not deny it. "There is a pestilence in this place," he whispers. "Under all of Rome's shadow. I feel like I'm dying. Like the earth is dying beneath me. No matter how many times I water her, she will not yield in this place." He swallows, bows his head and presses his cheek to his knees. "There will be no trees. No flowers. No sweet grass. It is just blood and it is just sand, and I cannot save all of it."

Hannibal frowns, worrying his lower lip between his teeth, and looks up. Above them, thunder rumbles, though it is a hollow sound, and feels like exhaustion on his skin.

"You intend to leave this place," he says.

Will nods. "With Mason's blood on my tongue," he replies. Hannibal hums, looking down at his hands. "But you say a slave raising a hand to his master earns the death of all of them. Alana, too."

"Alana too," Hannibal says, nodding.

"I do not intend to harm Margot. My desire is singular."

"I know Mason is not a pleasant man," Hannibal whispers, as low as he can so that only the sea and sand can hear. "But your viciousness has turned…sharper, even since this morning. What has he done to have offended you so?"

Will lifts his chin, and wipes at his eyes, at the tears on his face. "Do you know how a creature like me comes into existence?" he asks.

Hannibal blinks, and shakes his head. "I did not know, until meeting you, that such a thing as you even existed," he replies. "And I do not know what kind of creature you are, so no – I do not know your origin."

"The gods must visit a woman," Will whispers. "A woman who communes with them, and is their friend. She must be barren, a mother without any children, so that when she is blessed with one, she will devote every day, every ounce of life she can spare, to the growth and rearing of it." Will's upper lip curls, shows his teeth. "My kind are a selfish kind, Hannibal. We love, fiercely, but we are by nature…parasites. My mother loved me, and my father, too, and they knew the risks when I was conceived."

He shivers, and rubs a hand over his mouth. "She must be willing. That is the most important part. A child conceived through force is not something my gods condone. The sustainment of my life cannot be made if the mother does not want her child." His gaze turns black, his next words a low snarl; "Something these Roman gods care little for."

Hannibal tilts his head.

"That is why," he breathes in sudden understanding. "That is why you always ask."

Will nods. "I cannot bear the thought of feeding that way by force," he whispers. "Meat is different. We eat cows and sheep and fish, and they do not have the ability to give what we ask of them willingly. But sex is…"

Hannibal hums, looking out to the water. Considers, then says, with a certainty that turns his stomach into a sharp knot; "Is Margot already pregnant?"

Will shakes his head.

Alana, then.

"Who?"

"I can guess," Will says darkly. "And even if I am wrong, I have seen the way he touches her. The way he looks at his sister and Alana. I am certain that it would have only been a matter of time, had things not happened a certain way."

Hannibal swallows. "There are potions the Romans make, for house slaves, to end a pregnancy," he murmurs.

Will nods.

"She has not taken it."

Another nod. "I see the life in her," he murmurs. "I saw it, and I knew. She trembles when she speaks of Mason."

Hannibal's fingers curl, the same dark anger on Will's face coloring his own. "You must tell me, Will," he murmurs, "what your intentions are. No pretty words, for the sake of my feelings. You must be open and honest with me, if we are to survive."

Will nods. "I regret not telling you before," he murmurs. "It distressed me deeply, for I only saw a marriage. I could not see the designs behind it. I -." He looks up, meets Hannibal's eyes. "I didn't know it was Mason's design. I thought…"

He thought that Hannibal would marry Margot because he desires her. That he would cast Will aside for a worthy woman; a chance to father a child. That same insecurity he voiced the first time Hannibal came to his bed and split him apart.

Hannibal takes his hand, the one stained with blood, and raises it to his lips. He kisses Will's knuckles and Will shivers, both in cold and under fever, his eyes bright. "I am yours," he murmurs. Will breathes out, and swallows. His fingers curl, tighten.

"You are mine," he whispers, nodding. "You told me I could not sate my hunger with the touch of other men, of women. It is…a selfish thing, but I ask you to do the same." His eyes lift, and set themselves on Hannibal's face, and his fingers tighten further. "Promise me no one else will know your touch. You are mine, and mine alone."

"I swear it," Hannibal says, and it is as simple as that. "On the grasses of your homeland, and your rain, and on my life, I swear it."

Will smiles, his eyes closing as another wave of exhaustion sweeps through him, with a rumble of thunder overhead. His grip turns loose, and falls, and he rests his hands on his knees and takes in a deep breath.

"Are you hungry?" Hannibal asks.

"Starving," Will replies. "But we do not have time."

Hannibal nods, and looks to his own wrist. He swallows, clenches his jaw, and lifts it in offering.

"Blood will sate you," he whispers. Will blinks, and looks to him, lips parted. His eyes fall to Hannibal's wrist, hungry, famished. "Take. I am willing."

Will sags with a devastated whine, takes Hannibal's wrist and lifts it to his mouth. He kisses where the skin is thin and delicate, licks over Hannibal's pulse with a flutter of his lashes, his tongue wide and wet. It makes Hannibal shiver, and his free hand clenches, anticipating the pain.

Will bites, like Hannibal's flesh is no harder to pierce than meat falling off the bone. Blood wells up strongly around his teeth, diving into his mouth before his lips come down and seal tight around the wound. He sucks, and swallows, gasping with relief. It is not pleasurable, but it also does not hurt beyond the first bite, and Hannibal wonders if there is a venom in Will that eases his prey, lulls them into quiet and calm as he feasts on Hannibal's blood.

As Will drinks, the clouds open, and rain begins to fall.

They sit like that until Will's cheeks have regained color, and he releases Hannibal's arm with a final lick, covering it with his own hand. A strange warmth pulses from his palm, running up Hannibal's arm and to his chest, and Hannibal sighs, leans in and cups Will's face, drawing him into a kiss. Will's mouth is iron and blood, slick on the inside; his skin wet with rain, with the tears he has shed.

Will kisses him back, forceful and passionate, and then he pulls back and releases a sob, covering his mouth with his bloody hands.

"It's my fault," he whispers.

Hannibal tilts his head and does not releases his face. Their foreheads press together.

"Mason touched me," he says, but before Hannibal can question that, he adds; "He put his hand around my neck. During the celebration. It was enough to ignite that feral want in him. What he did to Alana – it's my fault."

"No, Will," Hannibal breathes. He brushes his thumb along Will's cheek, opens his eyes and meets Will's, finds them storm-dark and wet and open. "I have suspected for a long time that Mason's eyes lingered too long on Alana, and on his sister. This is not your fault."

"If you suspected, then you did nothing," Will growls.

Hannibal answers it with a rough noise of his own, parting from Will, his hands curled into fists. "If I had any evidence, many things would be different," he says. "There are laws, and ways of life here that even now are foreign to me -."

"That doesn't matter," Will says sharply. "They are foreign to me too, and yet I will do what needs to be done. And you will, because of your affection for me." His head tilts. "I create recklessness in you. Perhaps it is an overdue feeling."

At that, Hannibal smiles, though it is weak. "Perhaps."

Will stiffens, and his eyes move from Hannibal. "They are coming," he says, and stands. The rain has touched every part of him, and after Hannibal's offering he no longer moves with stiffness on his injured leg. Hannibal rises, and turns to see Margot and Alana, cloaked heavily, moving beneath the balcony.

He meets Margot's eyes, and the four of them cross the sands, towards the medical room that is empty now. Strange – there used to be a man in here almost every day. Will's presence makes them stronger, makes them vicious, but he wonders if the rain heals them as well. No man has bled enough to warrant attention that would see him living another day.

They gather in the room and Margot and Alana push their hoods back, revealing pale faces and worried eyes.

Will goes to Alana, speaking softly in their mother tongue. She looks at him with wide eyes and plants a hand to her stomach and Will shakes his head, covering her hand with his own.

Hannibal hears Mason's name pass between them but understands little else. Margot is watching them, and when Alana's eyes fill with tears, she releases a heartbroken sound, covering her mouth.

"Alana," she says. "Why did you not speak of this?"

Alana looks to her mistress, and shakes her head again, her hair damp and lying flat around her face. "What can be done?" she asks helplessly.

Will closes his eyes, and swallows.

"I can take it from you," he says. She looks at him and her eyes widen. She steps back, covering her stomach protectively. Will's fingers curl, but he does not chase her. "You will not feel any pain. No bleeding. But he is just a singular light, and I can…take it."

Alana is weeping openly, though her body does not move in sobs. She stands like a monument, her tears shed without the rest of her body crumbling beneath the weight of it. "… He?" she whispers.

Will nods. "A son," he says. "I believe it will be a boy. I have seen him."

The child Will has seen – not Margot's. Not Hannibal's. But a Verger heir, nonetheless.

Then, Alana sucks in a breath, and shakes her head again. "No," she says, cold as stone and fierce as a weapon. "I will not let you take him from me. He is mine, regardless of who his father is."

"Mason will not let you keep it," Hannibal says, soft with warning. "He will command you drink the slave potion, or see you gutted if you refuse."

"Then we must hide her," Margot says with a determined nod. Alana blinks at her in shock, and frowns.

"I will not leave you."

Will presses his lips together, and looks to Hannibal. Hannibal wants to shake his head, to warn Will against speaking of his intentions, but he finds his head nods instead in a silent encouragement.

"There is…another way," Will says, and looks to the women again.

"Mason tells me he intends to go to Rome," Hannibal tells them. "Once we are married," he nods to Margot, "and you are with child."

She winces, and swallows.

"Alana will be safe here, if Mason is gone."

"If Mason is *gone*," Will snaps, and he glares at Hannibal. "No. She will not be safe. And I would not be parted from you." Not just for food – Hannibal knows that, but yes, there is also

this: Will cannot come with them to Rome. He would remain here, and starve except for the flesh of his fellow man and whatever offerings are brought to him.

"What, then, can we do?" Margot asks, her eyes wide. She has gravitated to Alana and rests a hand on her shoulder, petting down her back. "Even if we were to go to Rome, it would look strange if we did not take Alana with us. And we might be gone for some time."

Will looks to Margot. His eyes shine, a single fissure of gold spreading out from his pupil to color his iris. He tilts his head, regarding her with the same look he gives the ocean, and the storm clouds.

"Domina," he whispers, and reaches for her. "Will you come into the rain with me?"

Margot looks at him with wide eyes, and Will smiles.

"I will not let any harm come to you. I simply wish to see."

Margot's eyes land on Hannibal, and he smiles and gestures for them to go out. Will takes her hand and they emerge into the rain. It is heavy now, a brief flare of lightning coloring the sky white. Alana hides herself beneath Hannibal's arm, sharing the cover of her cloak, but Hannibal barely feels the cold pelt of the rain as it beats down on the four of them.

"Alana," he murmurs. "When did this happen to you?"

Alana shakes her head. "The day Will killed Cordell," she replies. Not two months past, and well before Mason touched Will on his own. "He came for me in the night. I…dared not refuse."

"You were wise not to," Hannibal says, and wraps an arm around her. "I am deeply, deeply sorry for it, and will see it avenged, if I can."

She swallows, and shakes her head again. "It is in the past," she murmurs, and rubs at her wrists. "If I receive a son from it, I will love him dearly, as if he were conceived out of love."

Will leads Margot to the cliffs, and raises his hands to cup them, gathering water there. He looks to Margot and asks her to do the same, and when her hands are full, he adds his own pool to hers, and cups his hands beneath her pale, shaking fingers.

He speaks, his eyes closed, his voice a powerful chant over the roar of the thunder and the rush of the waves. He speaks in his own language and Alana shivers and gasps.

"What is he saying?" Hannibal asks her.

"He begins with a plea to the gods. A prayer, that they might look down upon him and forgive him his failure, and a hope that they are pleased by his offerings. He -." She shivers when Will speaks her name. "He is asking for a blessing on me, and my child. That we might be spared further torment."

Will's eyes glow golden as he lifts them to meet Margot's. He smiles at her, shining and wet, and drops her hands so that she alone is holding the water. He cups her face, still chanting,

though it has grown a sweet and familiar edge to it, like a lullaby to a child.

"He is asking for a vision. A full, clear path to what the gods desire of him. He offers his life, and his blood, to see their will done."

Another shaft of lightning splits the sky apart, landing down on the horizon of the ocean. Will's eyes snap to it, and widen, and though Margot quakes with fear, he does not release her, and her hands do not drop.

Then, Will kneels, and she knows the ritual now. She pours the water into his mouth and he drinks it, his hands sliding down her arms to help tilt her hands to the best angle. When it is done, he rises, and his eyes close.

He releases her. "Go to your love," he says, and Margot swallows, gathering her cloak tight to her and running to Alana's side. The women embrace, trying to find warmth when Hannibal moves from Alana. Will is trembling, on his hands and knees like a wounded beast. Will cries out as another strike of lightning hits, touching the edges of the cliffs and then Will throws himself to the edge of them, like he means to catch the next hit.

Hannibal does not get to him in time.

Will screams as he is struck, the white light touching his hands, first, and flowing through him in a pattern of veins where his blood flows. Hannibal gasps, his eyes wide, as he sees the innards of Will – the dark piece of his heart, the echoed hollow of his lungs, the outline of his spine and hips. Will lifts his head and his skull is a black mass, lit up around the eyes and mouth. The lightning does not fade, but pulses into him like a flow of fresh blood, until every inch of Will is coated and seared with bright light.

Then, it passes, thunder rolling in, and Will collapses to the ground.

Hannibal goes to him, rolling him to his back. Will is limp, but awake, his eyes fixed somewhere in the heavens, beyond Hannibal's head. Hannibal lifts him to a sitting position and Will begins to cough, like there is something stuck in his throat, and he howls and writhes in Hannibal's arms, gasping.

Another lightning strike, this time in the sea. Will spasms with it, his face a tight mask, though whether it is pain or something else, Hannibal cannot tell. Will's touch burns, something tingling like the return of blood to a sore limb.

Then, suddenly, there is a break in the clouds, and the moon shines on them all. The rain stops with an abrupt clap of thunder and Will howls, out to the ocean, his claws dug deep in the wet sand as he stares. His eyes are white, now – not gold, not blue, but lit up as though he still holds the lightning in his veins.

The moon passes. The rain falls away, and Will sags with another shaken breath, into Hannibal's arms.

Margot and Alana run to them, falling to their knees beside him, and Hannibal cups Will's face as his lashes flutter, and open. His eyes are blue again, crystal and sapphire, and they

focus on Hannibal's face.

He smiles. And then he laughs.

He touches Hannibal's cheek, knuckles gentle, and drags to his parted lips. "Rejoice," he whispers, soft as the breeze.

"Will?" Alana asks, touching his shoulder. "Will, are you alright?"

Will laughs again, and straightens under his own strength, though Hannibal's hands still hold his shoulders. He breathes in deeply, and looks out to the sea, a blissful smile on his face as though he has just feasted for days.

He takes Alana's hand and squeezes. Turns, and kisses her knuckles. "Rejoice, my friends," he says, and they are looking at him in disbelief, for no man should have survived such a strike from the gods. The Roman storm god is a cruel and vicious thing, but Hannibal suspects it was no Roman god who spoke to him just now.

"What did you see?" Hannibal whispers.

"I saw a child," Will says. "I saw him, running wild through fields of grass and flowers. His mother…" He turns to Alana and gives her a wide, gracious smile. "His mother embracing him. A large fire in a comfortable home. This is your fate."

She sobs, rubbing a hand over her mouth.

"There is no grass here," Margot whispers.

"No," Will says, and heaves another breath. "No. But the gods have shown me what must happen. We must…" He swallows. "We must give them an offering, for such a gift." He looks at Hannibal. "Forgive me. You must help me with this."

Hannibal nods. "Tell me what I must do."

"We must act quickly," Will says, and stands. He pulls Hannibal to his feet, then Alana while Hannibal helps Margot up. They are shivering in the cold but Hannibal's hands are warm from Will's flesh. "Before your next blood, domina."

"Tell us," Margot says with a nod, folding her cloak around her shoulders.

Will looks up to the sky, pressing his lips together.

"I see, now," he says, and his eyes drop and fix on Margot with a sharpness Hannibal has rarely seen outside of the arena. Will has, it seems, finished playing with his food. "I see what you desired, I see how it has to happen." He lifts his chin, and rolls his shoulders. "You must secure us a ship."

Margot blinks. "I can go to the docks tonight," she says quickly. "We can leave before dawn."

"No, not tonight," Will says, and rests a gentle hand on her arm. "This is a delicate thing. One wrong move, and we will all fall."

His eyes alight on Hannibal, and he smiles. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," Hannibal says, for he cannot see what he has seen and deny it. "Your will, my hands."

"Not my will," comes the reply. "The will of the gods. But, I suppose, in this we are aligned."

Alana suddenly stiffens, her eyes on the balcony. "Margot," she whispers, and they all turn their faces upwards, to see Mason standing on the balcony. His head is cocked, an oddly impassive look on his face.

"Hannibal," he calls, nasal and loud. "Why, pray tell, have you brought your betrothed to the hands of my dog?"

Before they can answer, Will smiles, and steps from the fold. He lifts his hands to Mason like he's presenting an offering. "Rejoice, my master, my dominus!" he calls. "I have happy news!"

Mason's eyes flash, and his upper lip curls.

"I was taken from my bed to speak to the gods, and they have granted me a vision," Will says. "You will see the Verger line extended!"

Mason's lip twitches, and he looks to Hannibal. Hannibal meets his gaze.

"I know it is not Roman custom, but I have seen a happy thing. A child. If my domina is bedded this night, she will conceive a son!"

Hannibal's eyes widen, and his fingers curl as he looks at Will. Beside him, Margot is similarly stiff, but they must trust – they must.

Mason crows in delight, clapping his hands together. "That is happy news," he calls, his smile turning viciously pleased, lecherous as they alight on Margot. "I feel I must summon my sister and her future husband to their bed at once!"

Will bows his head.

"Come, Margot. It is high time you became a mother."

Mason turns away, and Will lifts his head, a black snarl crossing his face before he turns, and he touches Hannibal's arm. "You must make him believe," he says to the three of them. "Bloody the bedsheets." He looks to Margot. "Make the sounds women make when taken by passion. We must make him believe you are with child."

Margot nods frantically, and she and Hannibal share a look. Hannibal knows he will not touch her like that, and he hopes she understands the same.

"Alana, when the dawn breaks, you must take the sheets to our master and show him, and tell him whatever you must – that your lady was bred multiple times in the night."

Alana is pale, but her expression set and determined.

"If Mason believes me with child, he will take us all to Rome," Margot says.

Will nods. "And that is where Hannibal must play his part," he says, and their eyes meet. "Convince him to have a celebration. A great feast and show of sport. One where all the titans of Mason Verger will be within the arena walls."

Hannibal blinks at him, and breathes; "You mean to cause an uprising."

Will nods, his upper lip curling. "I have friends," he says. "Ones that have been seduced by the promise of freedom. Ones that will help us." Hannibal thinks of Randall, and Francis – of Garrett and Elliot, even Jack. Men with no love for Mason or his ludus or the entirety of Rome.

"The Verger house will fall," he says.

Will nods, and looks to Alana. "But its line will live on," he murmurs. "In a happy place, untouched by this land's evil."

Margot lets out a soft sound, trembling and afraid.

Will's eyes meet hers. "Freedom," he tells her, and cups her hands. "That is what you desired. This is the price. The death of your 'beloved' brother and the ruination of his ludus." Margot swallows, and Will cocks his head. "That is the price. Will you pay it?"

A brief spell of indecision falls over her. Hannibal can read it, in the sag of her shoulders, the worried dart of her eyes between each of Will's. Will's shine, a tumultuous blend of blue and gold.

Then, her expression grows steely, and she nods. "Yes."

Will smiles at her, and kisses her knuckles.

"Trust me, my lady," he whispers. "And I will see it done."

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They do as Will commands them – Hannibal and Margot go to Margot's room, Alana in tow, Mason's raucous laughter following them down the hallway. It is all Hannibal can do not to turn on him and gut him right now, in the middle of the night.

But he must trust, and be obedient to Will's designs.

Hannibal has not been in Margot's room since she had her first blood, though not much has changed from his memory – she has sheets of silk and a single pelt from the hide of a bear that Mason 'hunted' with his father, though the pockmarks and burns on it suggest that the bear was more likely an animal used for baiting and fighting than anything actually wild. Mason is not the kind of man to chase after a predator that can fight back.

Her bed is low and tucked into a corner, a large window allowing moonlight to come in and color the walls grey and pearly. There is water from the rain, scattered in a dark circle around the innards and wetting the thin curtains, which Alana goes to, and takes in both hands.

She pauses, and then smiles, before drawing the curtains closed. "Your room looks out to the ludus," she says.

Margot nods, smiling thinly. "I have often gazed upon the gladiators as they were training," she says, pouring herself a cup of wine. She offers a second to Hannibal, who takes it, sipping the sweet liquid slowly. It is not overly-tart, and crisp on the tongue, much better tasting than the thick, sharp wines Mason prefers. She laughs, and settles on her bed, and Alana takes her cloak from her shoulders and hangs it over the back of a thin chair. "I used to be so afraid of them. My father would spin stories about how they were all rabid dogs, rapists and murderers who were trying to earn their honor back on the sands."

Hannibal raises a brow, and wonders if Molson Verger ever said the same of him.

"And yet, I have never met a single man who lives down there who does not behave as a perfect gentleman, though sometimes an unrefined one," Margot finishes, and tips her wine back. She hisses, sucking in a breath, and Alana takes her glass and refills it. "They are savage, certainly, but a different kind than that of Romans." Her eyes lift to Hannibal's. "Much different."

Hannibal smiles at her, and goes to her chair, which sits at a small desk laden with powders and ink for her face. She doesn't need it, never has, in Hannibal's opinion, and some of it looks fresh. Perhaps from the lady Bedelia, a welcoming gift that is as passive-aggressive as it is unnecessary. Roman women seem so terribly aware of each other's comparative beauty, as much as men are with their wallets or the sizes of their cocks.

He snorts at his own thoughts, and takes another drink.

Alana sighs, and returns Margot's glass to her. Margot winces, takes a drink, and then her eyes snap up to Alana, and widen. "Oh! Gods, I'm being ridiculous. Please, sit with me." Alana smiles at her as she pats the bed by her hip, settling down with a sigh. She is not far along enough to experience any discomfort, and she is still as slim and shapely as she has always been. The women gravitate to each other and Hannibal looks at them, and is reminded of himself and Will, on the cliffs. They touch each other the same way.

He clears his throat, and says into his wine glass; "I am happy you two have each other."

Alana blushes, but doesn't deny it. Margot, neither. She touches Alana's pink cheek and smiles, the two of them brushing shoulders like playful cats. "I could not ask for a more beautiful and loyal friend," she says. Hannibal smiles, thinking of Will again. Though it is necessary, and strange, for they have only been parted for a few minutes, he already misses Will, and aches for his warmth at Hannibal's side, in his arms.

They sit in silence for a while, and then Alana clears her throat, a distinctly uncomfortable set to her shoulders when she says; "We must begin soon."

Hannibal nods, and stands. He refills his wine glass before setting it down, and takes what looks like one of Margot's long hair pins, sliding it into his hand from her makeup desk.

The bite wound Will dealt him is still tender, not-yet healed by the rain, and he goes to Margot's pristine sheets and pulls the bear pelt back, kneeling down in the center. He grits his teeth and stabs the end of the sharp pin through his bitten flesh, waits for a few droplets of blood to well up, and then turns his wrist and smears it along the center of the sheets.

Margot lets out a hum of amusement. "Have you deflowered many women, Hannibal?" she asks, touching his shoulder lightly as he drags his wrist forward and back. His stomach turns as small rutting tracks form, like they would if a man were to break a woman apart and keep mounting her while she bled, staining her thighs, between her cheeks, the bed below.

When he is done, he licks his palm and wipes his wrist clean, securing the pin to his belt. He stands, and gathers his wine glass from her desk, downing it in one swallow.

"Hannibal?" That's Alana's voice, sounding concerned.

He clears his throat, his eyes on the dregs of wine, and manages a smile when he looks away and meets Margot's heavy gaze. "You said to me, outside of war, women see far more blood than men," he tells her, and she nods. "That is true. It has always been true. But it also means that men, when they see blood, see it in the most unnatural ways."

He turns away, his fingers clenching around his glass, and refills it. "Brought about by the suffering of others." He drinks again, until the burn has spread to his belly and his head feels quite fuzzy with it. His exhale is heavy, through his nose. "To answer your question, Margot: no, I have not deflowered many women. But I have seen them suffer immensely under the whim of their captors." He looks to Alana. "Their fathers." His eyes move to Margot. "Their brothers."

She presses her lips together, touching her fingers to her stomach.

They say nothing, and Hannibal sighs, and takes another drink. "Forgive me," he says. "So much has happened in the last few hours alone, I think it's all catching up to me. You must pardon an old man his melancholy."

His joke works; she laughs. "You're not that old, Hannibal," she says, teasing, and he smiles at her.

He shares a look with Alana, and refills his glass, and goes to the window. "Make your noises, as Will commanded of you," he tells her, and parts the curtains, finding that, indeed, he can see most of the training sands at the entrance to the medical room on the far side from this post. "The gods be willing, it will be the last time you ever have to pretend, or to hide."

"Whose gods?" Margot asks from her bed, soft and amused.

Hannibal smiles, and down on the sands, he spies a shadow. It is Will, shining beautifully in the moonlight. Hannibal steps through the curtains, onto the lip of stone wetted by rain, and watches as Will goes to the cliffsides. He turns his head, and their eyes meet. It is like the old legends, of princesses in towers and their roguish warriors come to bring them rescue; when Will smiles at him, Hannibal's chest and being leap towards him, like he might jump from the window to be beside Will.

He can hear, faintly, soft, wanton moans of women from Margot's room. He does not know if they are faked or if Alana is sharing carnal love with her mistress, but he doesn't much care. The noises do not stir him – how can they, when his eyes have been given the gift of Will's tanned, strong body, the brilliant brightness of his eyes and the sharp angle of his smile? How can he care for the sweetness of Margot or Alana, when Will holds lightning in his hands, and his passion summons the rains?

Hannibal wants to go to him, aches for it like hunger, but he must resist. A new husband would not possibly leave his betrothed's bed to spend time with a dog, after all.

Will turns his head away, rubs the back of his neck, and sighs, closing his eyes. The rush of the waves brings a chill to the air, and the sky is cloudless and starry, the storm from earlier chased away by an up kicked wind. The breeze teases at his hair and clothes, pulling at them as though begging Will to show more of his skin to the hungry eyes of the moon. Hannibal wonders, absently, the thought based only in wild stories and whispered, giggling words, if he is used to wearing so many clothes. They say Hibernians are closely tethered to their gods, in the rocks and the grass and the trees, and would dance naked in firelight while they sang their songs of worship.

Behind Hannibal, he hears Margot moan, and sighs, taking another sip of wine. If she's faking anything, she is a wonderful actress.

The wind changes, and carries the sound of Will's laughter. Hannibal's gaze drops to him, and he finds Will smiling, his eyes closed, head tilted up under the shine of the moon. He licks his lips, wraps his arms around his knees, and starts to sing. It is another lilting song, one almost playful though there is a lingering air of sadness to it, like most of the things Will sings to the sea. Hannibal's heart seizes in his chest, so taken by this beautiful creature and his voice. His knuckles whiten around his goblet, his lips part in a gasp, and oh, how he aches to dive down

onto the sands, to wrap Will up in his arms and bury himself in any place Will would let him: his hands, in Will's hair; his face in Will's neck; his cock between Will's legs.

Perhaps it is magic, or maybe the acoustics are just right, but Will's song sounds like Will is standing right next to him, that they are both sitting on the cliffs, perhaps, gazing out into the black toss of the ocean, the depths that even on a day bright with sunlight are never clear enough to see into. If any fish venture so close, they do not touch the surface.

He listens to Will's song, and thinks of beautiful, crystal streams. Thinks of the shine of glimmering fish within them, thinks of tall oak trees, and maple, heavy with sap. Thinks of grass that is long enough to touch while walking, and earth so soft and warm that every step sinks just a little, and a sky that is as beautiful and clear as Will's eyes. Thinks of soft, bright flowers and the gentle gaze of wild deer, the cries of birds.

Thinks of Will, amidst it all, glowing and alive.

His stomach is tense with longing, hunger stirring deep in his belly as he looks at Will, and then Will's song cuts off abruptly, and he turns to look Hannibal's way, and smiles. Behind him, past the curtains, the women have fallen silent.

Will's smile widens, and he stands. "Rejoice," he calls. "The first part is done."

Hannibal returns his smile, and then he ducks back between the curtains, finding Alana and Margot in a tightly-twined coil of pale flesh and loose hair. Alana lifts her head from Margot's chest, flushing deeply, and moves to cover them both with the bear pelt.

Hannibal smiles, winks at her, and refills his wine glass. Strangely, he thinks the moment he and Will shared outside is far more intimate than anything he could have experienced in this room. Not to say that Alana and Margot are not just as fiercely connected, but Hannibal's place is not here. It is at Will's side, and what he just witnessed has only cemented that in his mind.

Finally, Margot stirs, blinking blearily, a glaze of pleasure on her face. Hannibal goes to them and hands her the wine, which she takes, sitting up, clutching her dress to her chest to shield the sight of her breasts and stomach from him.

Alana rises, fixes her dress and smooths back her hair. "Give me the sheet," she says, and Margot nods, wrapping herself in the bear pelt when Hannibal takes the wine back, and Alana tugs the sheet free. Hannibal is pleased to see his blood has dried in a stain that looks very convincing. Alana's face is a subtle mask of disgust, pale as she folds it in preparation to present it.

"Alana," Hannibal calls, as she turns away. She freezes and looks at him. "I do not think you should present the sheet alone. And certainly not tonight. The hour is late, and Mason may doubt Will's word if we present the blood to him too soon."

She bites her lower lip, but there is relief on her face when she nods, and smiles. Hannibal returns it, takes the sheet from her and places it on Margot's chair.

"Both of you get some rest," he says.

"You should sleep, too," Margot says tiredly. "I'm not going to exile you to the floor, Hannibal."

Hannibal huffs, but she fixes him with an arched brow that brooks no argument. He sighs, and unfastens his belt, setting it atop the sheet, and takes off his sandals, but keeps the rest of his clothes on. Margot is in the center of the bed and he sits on the edge of it, Alana behind Margot and embracing her tightly. Hannibal lies down, on his back, his eyes fixed on the ceiling and his hands folded over his stomach.

Margot smiles at him, and pats his shoulder. "You're a wonderful friend, Hannibal," she says. The bed smells like a woman's pleasure; thick and musky and of that floral oil. "One day I hope to repay your kindness, and your strength of character."

Hannibal smiles, and turns his head to meet her eyes – and behind her, Alana's, both of them shining in the very low light.

"Right now, my priority is making sure we all get out of this alive," he says quietly. He turns onto his side, one arm folded so his bicep forms his pillow, and meets their eyes. "Our fate rests in the hands of Will's visions and his designs, and we can only hope that there is no other god interfering with them."

"I wonder what his intention is," Alana says. "What is the gain, in making Mason think Margot is pregnant? He will want to take all of us to Rome."

And that is strange, but Hannibal sighs, and presses his lips together. "I know it isn't much help, because you do not know Will like I do, but we just have to trust him. He gains nothing from lying to us or leading us astray."

Margot breathes out, shakily. "He means to kill my brother."

Hannibal nods.

"If he does, he will have to kill every guard. Every friend of ours. And every slave in this house will be a fugitive for it."

Alana hums. "That must be why he needs you to secure us a ship," she says. "He does not intend to remain in Roman country."

"…*Oh*," Margot says, heavy with understanding. "Oh, of course."

She sounds nervous at the notion – Hannibal understands. Her whole life, she has scarcely traveled farther than the markets. Even Rome seems like continents away to someone like her, though it is scarcely two weeks by fast horse.

"It'll be alright," he tells her, attempting to soothe. "When it is done, you will be free. Both of you."

Margot smiles at that, and nods. "And so will you," she replies. "Truly."

Hannibal blinks, and rolls onto his back, looking up at the ceiling once more. Strange; it hadn't occurred to him, yet, that this is true. He'd been too worried about Will's freedom, and Alana's, and Margot's, to consider that he would also be gaining his own.

Freedom. True freedom. It's a pleasant thought.

Hannibal stirs when Alana rises, her expression drawn, face pale, but she appears well-rested as she corrects her clothes, straightens her hair, and takes the bloodied sheet in her hands. Hannibal rises as well, leaving Margot in bed below the bear pelt, and gently cups Alana's shoulders.

"I will not linger long," he tells her. "I will join Mason for breakfast within half an hour."

Alana presses her lips together, and nods. "I'm not afraid of him," she says, though her voice shakes. "Rather, I'm not afraid of the things he might do to me."

Hannibal smiles. "But it's not just you anymore," he finishes, and she makes a sheepish, worried noise. "I understand. Know that every hurt he delivered to you will be paid for with his blood."

She huffs, and rolls her eyes. "I have no delight in blood," she says. "But justice…that, I find delight in."

Hannibal smiles, and kisses her forehead before he lets her go, gathering his belt. She goes one way, towards Mason's rooms, and he goes the other, towards the kitchens, beside which his own quarters lay. He washes his face and hands, changes into a long, faded purple tunic that reaches his knees, and secures the clothing with his belt. He dons boots and pulls a cloth *subligaria* on under the skirt of his tunic, wets his hair back from his face, and sighs.

He leaves, and follows the scent of warm, fresh meat out to the breakfast area, where Mason is already there. He has the bloodied sheet folded beside him, and Hannibal swallows back a disgusted expression at the sight of it. How tasteless. In front of Mason, on the table, is a bowl of grapes and a large platter of thickly-cut, pink pork belly.

Mason grins at him, and gestures for Hannibal to sit. "Morning, old friend!" he crows, clapping his hands together. He sits forward, and Alana appears at his back, offering him a cup of wine that he takes and drinks from, the dark liquid pooling at the corners of his mouth. "How was your night?"

Hannibal smiles, and wishes he were drunker for this. Alana offers him another cup of wine and he takes it with a nod of thanks. "Very pleasant, thank you," he replies politely.

Mason hums, sitting back, his knees spread wide beneath his long, blue robe. "Excellent!" he says. "I see you speared her quite nicely." His eyes drop to the bloodstain on the sheet and

Hannibal swallows a large mouthful of wine to keep himself snarling. "Though I note it's the only stain. Was she so thirsty she sucked you right up?"

Hannibal's fingers clench. When Will is done with Mason, he may have to insist on getting in a few blows of his own. He is simply thankful that Margot is not here to bear such crass language.

He swallows, and forces himself to say; "If it's one thing an old dog knows, it's how to breed a woman properly." He looks at Mason and manages a smile. "Though I sense it might have been the gods, as well – they promised us a child, after all."

Mason grins at him, and reaches forward, plucking a thick grape and popping it into his mouth. "Yes," he says, before he has fully chewed and swallowed. "We have been truly blessed by the gods, my old friend. I think it deserves a tribute, before we venture off to Rome."

Hannibal lifts a brow, remembering Will's words. "A celebration," he says. "Yes."

Mason nods. "There will be another set of games in the next week," he says, almost thoughtfully. His bright eyes lift to Hannibal and he taps his fingers to his mouth in thought, before his smile spreads, slow and wide, splitting his face in half. "Yes. We will see you married before then." He stands, and claps his hands together. "This will be a perfect wedding gift!"

"A…gift?" Hannibal repeats, standing as well.

Mason turns on him, smiling wide. "There is an Easterner, I have heard, who claims to have the deadliest gladiators in the land, that can even stand up to Spartans! It has been said he will enter his warriors into the games, and, well, Will might certainly draw a crowd, with his reputation, but I think we can do one better! Every warrior in the Verger ludus, taking to the sands as one against this cocky cur and his wild dogs."

Hannibal swallows, and nods. "That sounds like a fine idea," he says.

"Yes," Mason replies, and grins. "So what do you say, Hannibal?"

Hannibal frowns, tilting his head.

"I…am afraid I do not follow."

Mason claps his hands together, and then lifts his hands up in a gesture of welcome and announcement. "Did I not say *every* warrior in the Verger ludus?" he asks.

Hannibal presses his lips together, and refuses to move his eyes, but he can see Alana pause in her work and go very, very tense. "You wish me to fight as well," he says.

"My gift to you, my oldest and dearest friend, is one more day upon the sands, before fatherhood and future calls you away from it forever," Mason says, and Hannibal cannot tell if he genuinely considers this a gift or not. "The lady Bedelia has remarked more than once how eager you seem to be to return to it, and I have seen you going to the training grounds

far more often than even Doctore. You are a dedicated warrior, Hannibal, and I would see you fight one last time, sate that bloodlust in your soul!" He claps his hand on Hannibal's chest, smiling. "For after, you might only find satisfaction in my sweet sister's flesh."

Hannibal swallows back his snarl, his instinctive refusal. His fingers clench behind his back and he forces himself to remain calm, to trust. Will must have seen this coming.

"It is a gracious gift," Hannibal says, finally, and smiles. "One I will do well not to waste. No one will doubt the glory and honor of your ludus, and we will fill the arena with Eastern blood."

Eastern blood, just like Hannibal's. He swallows when Mason crows with delight and steps away.

"Excellent news, most excellent!" he says. "Now, you must go train! Go, go! The Praetor and lady Bedelia will be visiting us tonight, and we must share the happy news of Margot's breeding, and they will bear witness to your marriage. We will do it tomorrow, and throw a grand party, and put on the finest show…"

He leaves the room, continuing on to himself. Hannibal's shoulders sag and Alana goes to him, handing him another cup of wine. He swallows it all.

"Mason wants you to fight?" she asks. Hannibal nods, and sets the cup down. "Did Will tell you of this?"

He shakes his head. "It is no matter," he replies. In fact, he is strangely excited at the prospect of fighting, side by side with Will and his friends, all of them in the arena. He does not know why Mason wants this, and does not know if Will saw it coming, but he is almost giddy with the thought of returning to the arena, to witness and share in Will's kill, to unleash some of his savage frustration on his enemy.

Hannibal had been violent, before joining the army and then his subsequent slavery. It is not only one of the reasons he's still standing, but one of the things that had marked him as Molson's favorite. The man had an eye for particularly capable war dogs.

He is smiling when he meets Alana's eyes, and she rolls her own. "Men," she mutters, and gathers the sheet in her arms, heading towards the laundry. Hannibal huffs a laugh, and takes a few cuts of pork, eating on his way down to the ludus.

He finds Will in a bare-handed spar with Randall, his skin already slick with sweat and making his eyes shine starkly. He watches as Will kicks behind Randall's knee, sending him down to the ground, and then shoves him onto his back. He prowls forward, snarling, and Randall's eyes, though wide, are determined. Hannibal smiles, for he sees Will's joy, sees his delight as Randall scrambles to his feet and lunges, sending them both to the ground like rolling puppies.

He gets a hand around Will's neck and squeezes, before Will knees him in the chest, winding him and sending him onto his side in the sand. Will rises, throws Randall onto his stomach and straddles him, his mouth at Randall's neck.

Randall freezes, his eyes wide, and he bats his hand against the sand. "I yield," he says, and unlike the last time Hannibal bore witness to this, he does not sound afraid. Rather, they regard each other like brothers, wrestling for play and sport rather than life or death.

Will laughs, and pets a hand through Randall's thick hair, before he pushes himself upright and hauls Randall to his feet. "Well fought," he says, in the language of the Rhine. Then, his attention shifts, and he meets Hannibal's eyes.

He smiles, and lets go of Randall, and Randall leaves to pair off against Garrett.

Hannibal takes two wooden swords from the slave boy, and they go to the edge of the cliffs. He tosses Will his weapon and they sink into a ready stance.

Will lunges first, a swift arc and then a parry, and Hannibal smiles. They're warming up, merely dancing, as they circle each other and shift into readiness again. "Do you enchant him as well?" Hannibal asks, more curious than anything else. He remembers Will saying even Mason touching him might have sent him into a feral state, and he is certain men such as these are just as easy prey.

Will smiles, dodging when Hannibal swings for his head, ducks down and slides his sword up Hannibal's thigh, gets it parried. Their shoulders knock and Will grins, nips sharply at Hannibal's shoulder, the steps away from him.

"Only enough to calm him down," he replies. "I was hungry, before, and my behavior was… bad." He swallows, and they come together again in a series of swift blows, swords clacking together with loud, solid thuds. "I merely made him calm enough that I could convince him I would not eat him in his sleep."

Hannibal hums. "And is that what you were trying to do with me?" he asks. Will frowns, tilting his head to one side. "Did you make me calm, or awaken some other desire in me, like you feared you did to Mason?"

Will blinks, and straightens out of his fighting stance. "You think I enchanted you?" he asks. He sounds genuinely confused, and shakes his head. "I didn't."

"You have your magic," Hannibal replies. "I have felt it."

At that, Will's lips twitch upwards. "Hannibal," he says, softly, like speaking to a child. He steps forward and places a hand on Hannibal's chest. "You cannot willingly feed me if you are under a spell." His lashes lower, his teeth sinking into his lower lip. "Whatever desire I awoke in you, it was not by design."

And, though Hannibal has never coveted the flesh of a man before, and he has never felt such deep longing and connection with someone like he has with Will, he believes him. After all, Will caught his eye and attention from the very beginning, long before they touched.

Will's eyes lift, and he smiles. "Do I calm you?" he asks, tilting his head.

Hannibal smiles, and says, "No. Quite the opposite. You ignite me."

"'Ignite'," Will murmurs. "What is that word?"

"To light a fire. In this case, one fierce and roaring. That is what you do to me."

"Ah." Will's eyes soften, and he steps closer, fingers of his free hand dragging along Hannibal's wrist. His head dips, lips parted and lashes low. "To me, you feel like a storm. Lightning, and wild wind, and you nourish me, you cover me and I feel like earth, aching for you. I…"

He trails off, swallows. Hannibal isn't sure how to stop his hands from shaking, desperate to touch Will.

"Mason wishes to see us fight together," he says. Will blinks, and looks up at him. "Every warrior, against a foreign lanista. It is his wedding gift to me."

Will nods. "When?"

"Next week."

Will nods again, licks his lips, and smiles. "Next week. Yes. Good. That is…that is good." He pushes himself back and raises his sword to begin again. "When you know the day, tell Margot to secure a ship for that night. We must leave at dusk."

Hannibal nods, and parries when Will lunges for him, grabbing a handful of his tunic and throwing him back with a savage push. Will skids to a halt, grinning widely, flushed and fine and beautiful in the sunlight, and lunges for him again.

Chapter End Notes

Here's a link to the song I imagined Will singing: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLUY_WLMQoc

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

so sorry for the delay, loves! Enjoy this fairly chill chapter before the Shit Goes Down.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal will admit, Mason has thrown a rather spectacular party to celebrate Hannibal's and Margot's engagement. He had the mosaics repainted and the pool cleaned, commissioned tapestries and banners in the Verger colors of purple and gold to hang in the main room to create the illusion of secrecy and seclusion, though most of them are very sheer and can be seen through when lit from behind. It creates a strangely voyeuristic atmosphere, though Hannibal supposes that is simply Mason's personal flare. There is a single giant slaughtered pig acting as the centerpiece for the meal, plates piles high with dried figs, dark and shining cherries, and bowls brimming with green grapes. There is a section dedicated to breads and sweet, honeyed desserts, dotted with various fruits to enhance flavor and texture. He senses this was Margot's suggestion, as he sees most of the ladies have gravitated at some point or other to the sweeter foods, while the men favor the meat. The pig is not nearly so macabrely butchered as the last one was, and for that he is grateful.

"Hannibal!" He turns at the sound of the lady Bedelia's voice, finds her approaching him in a black and gold swirl of fine silks and dress, a wide smile on her face, her hair pinned to her head in a carefully curled array and set in place with gold and pearls.

He smiles at her, and takes her hand to kiss her knuckles as she comes to a halt in front of him. "I must congratulate you," she says, her voice as measured and smooth as a falling curtain, a wave that is low and friendly. "Such a fine match."

"I am very fortunate," Hannibal says, and catches the Praetor Dimmond a little way off, in deep conversation with Mason and another nobleman that Hannibal doesn't recognize. He is not surprised to see the occasional furtive glance thrown their way – where Bedelia goes, Anthony follows like a protective hound. "Margot is a beautiful, fine woman."

Bedelia hums, smiling closed-lipped, and takes a sip of her wine. "I wonder," she says coolly, "what will become of her name? Do you have one for her to take?"

Hannibal tilts his head, and smiles at the underhanded attempt at a blow. Hannibal has been a slave almost as long as she's been alive, and to be robbed of one's last name is not nearly so big a slight to him as it would be to her. "I have a family name," he replies. "And if she wishes to take it, or she doesn't, will not please me more greatly either way."

Bedelia's eyes flash, her head tilts, and she smiles. "Of course," she says with a regal bow. "Forgive my ungracious tongue. It must be the wine." Indeed, there is a flush high on her

cheeks, though she normally looks some kind of dazed when in the ludus. He can smell floral oil on her, and wonders if she is perhaps more passionate with her husband after seeing the warriors fight. So much exposed flesh and sport is sure to make even the most chaste woman blink twice.

"There is nothing to forgive, my lady," Hannibal replies instead. He looks around again to the gathered guests. Margot and Alana are surrounded by other high-born ladies, and judging by the look on their faces they are engaged in quite unladylike conversation. He catches Alana's eye and smiles at her, and she grins back before returning her attention to her mistress. "How are you enjoying the celebration?"

"A trifle boring, if you'll permit my tongue further ungraciousness," she says coolly, and takes another drink. Her eyes wander, as they so-often do. "The last time we were at such an event there were more…engaging things to admire. And, of course, a show of sport."

Hannibal nods. Mason had wanted to bring the gladiators up, but Hannibal had argued against it. Firstly, he never wants to put Will in that situation again, and secondly, he had cited it bad form to have a show of blood at a wedding celebration. The Roman goddess of marriage and the hearth is a fierce creature, and vengeful, and it would be wrong to insult her by paying tribute to war.

Besides, if there were to be a show of blood, Will would undoubtedly need attending to after, and Hannibal can hardly leave his own party to be in his much more pleasant company.

"Will you walk me to the balcony?" Bedelia asks him. "I should like to see the moon."

Hannibal gives her a shallow bow, and takes a glass of wine from a passing slave, and they walk together towards the balcony that overlooks the ludus. The night is chill and Bedelia shivers, wrapping her shawl around her upper arms and shoulders, her eyes down on the blood-wet sand, and then to the cliffs, and the ocean beyond it.

"Has a man ever fallen, I wonder?" she asks.

"Only once, in my time here," Hannibal replies, sipping his wine. It is very sweet and thick on the tongue, and he finds himself thirsting for rain to wash his mouth.

"Oh?" Bedelia asks, her eyes shining in the pale moonlight. "During a bout, I presume."

Hannibal shakes his head. "No," he replies. "He jumped."

Bedelia swallows, and cups her neck. "Oh," she says, and swallows again. "I imagine it's a cruel way to die. If being beaten against the cliffs did not kill him, being dragged out to drown..." She shivers again. She pauses, and then says, "The Praetor tells me you will be rejoining the arena, in the fight against the Eastern man's warriors."

Hannibal nods. "It is Mason's wedding gift to me," he says, and smiles into his next drink. "One last taste of it before I become a sedentary man."

She laughs, at that. "Do you truly believe you will ever be a sedentary man?" she asks, one brow arced, smile teasing when Hannibal looks at her. "I imagine when Mason makes his moves to place himself on a consulate in Rome, someone will have to take over this ludus."

Hannibal blinks at her. "Mason has never shown a desire to engage in politics," he says carefully. Bedelia is, after all, not a friend, and certainly not a confidante. It would be a grave misstep to assume he can trust her and speak freely.

She laughs again. "Oh, Hannibal, why do you think he is so doggedly perusing Anthony's friendship?" she asks him, like he is a child. "Every man wishes to climb from his station, be it Emperor or slave. Mason's eyes have only ever been focused upwards."

"Not mine," Hannibal replies, and takes another drink. "I am quite content with my life."

"Mm, and yet you are set to marry the lady of the house," Bedelia says. "A long gambit, for certain, but one that has paid off. I wonder, should the gods prove most unfavorable to you, and you should die in the ring, what would become of her?"

"I imagine Mason will find her another suitable match," Hannibal replies coolly. He does not fear death, and hardly thinks of it. After the things he has seen, he has become much more invested in the idea of life; of fertile fields and great forests, of birdsong and bare bodies dancing around a fire.

Bedelia smiles at him. "You have always been such a practical man, haven't you?" she asks, and while her tone is friendly, there is some steel in her words. "It's refreshing, to speak to someone and know they have no ulterior motive."

Hannibal raises a brow. "If that is true, I daresay my place must be here, if only to preserve the purity of a ludus. Men like me, men like those who fight down below, have no desire in them but to survive when it comes down to it."

"Then we are not so different," Bedelia says. "Some survive with the sword, some with their words. And then one day we all die and end up in the same place anyway."

He huffs a laugh, and finishes his wine. "Well said," he replies. "Come, it is cold out here and I cannot possibly stand by and watch you shiver."

She smiles, and nods. "What a gentleman," she says, and follows him back inside. A slave appears with a jug of wine to refill their cups, and then Anthony appears from the crowd, looking relieved when he sees Bedelia.

"My love," he says, and takes her by the arm, kissing her cheek. She smiles at him and Hannibal wonders if this, too, is one of those things she is doing for the sake of survival. She is an interesting woman. "Mason tells me that there will be a great game two days from now, with all of his gladiators."

"Yes," Bedelia replies. "Hannibal was just telling me so as well. He will be amongst the fighters."

"Is that so?" Anthony asks, both brows rising. "A true delight, then. A spectacle like none other, I'm sure."

"I shall do my best to put on a good show," Hannibal replies, lifting his glass. "I'm sure it will be a day none of us will soon forget."

As the party winds down, Hannibal accompanies Margot and Alana to Margot's room, for appearances' sake. But his blood burns and he aches for Will's company, having been held up with party preparations the entire day. He has not seen Will since the day after Will sang for him on the cliffs, and he desperately, desperately wants to be by his side again.

Margot gives him a knowing look, and dismisses him once they are certain everyone has retired for the night. He goes to his rooms and sheds the heavy cloak he had worn, to hide Will's bite on his neck and the scar on his wrist. Hannibal moves as a shadow, spying neither slave nor guest as he makes his way down to the ludus, unlocking the gate and closing it behind him. Will is not on the cliffs, but in his cell, his back to the wall on his bed, his eyes closed.

They open when Hannibal enters, and he smiles, scrambling to his feet with a happy sound. "I didn't think you'd visit me tonight," he says, his eyes bright with joy as Hannibal embraces him, and kisses him deeply.

"I could not stand to be parted from you for a single second longer," he replies, and it is true. Will smiles, and cups his face, drawing him in for another kiss. "Everything is set in place. The fight will happen two days from now. I have already confirmed with Margot that we have a ship waiting for us."

"Good," Will replies, breathless, his cheeks coloring a delicate pink. He bites his lower lip, shivers, and draws closer, until they are touching everywhere, chest to knee. Will is wearing only a strip of cloth around his hips, his skin is warm and dry and beautifully golden in the light coming from the torches lit outside.

His hands slide down Hannibal's flanks, to his belt, and curl around the pouch of oil Hannibal brought. He smiles, and leans up for another kiss, before he tugs Hannibal against him and guides him towards the bed. "We're so close," he breathes, jittery and wide-eyed. "Close enough I can taste it."

"Are you nervous?" Hannibal asks, breathless as Will turns him and pushes him down onto the bed, climbing atop him. He pushes at Hannibal's robes until his thighs and cock is exposed, and ruts against him, the dry drag of cloth spurring Hannibal's flesh to respond.

Will smiles, and shakes his head, opening the pouch and slicking his fingers with oil. "No," he replies. "I feel alive. Like there is lightning in my veins and a storm in my heart." Hannibal shivers, remembering how Will had looked, that very same, lit from within. He glows, now, his eyes colored gold.

Will kneels up, pushing at his remaining clothing until he can fight one leg free, and settles on Hannibal again, taking both of them in hand and stroking, slow and slick. Hannibal growls, fingers flexing on Will's jutting hipbones as he prowls over Hannibal, free hand in the little pillow by his head, their eyes locked together.

"I want to see you fight," Will says, his throat flexing and entire body rolling, chasing the pleasure of his hand and Hannibal's cock sliding against his own. Hannibal's lashes flutter, but he dares not close his eyes. "I want to see you, red and shining, in all your glory, and know that you are mine."

"You will," Hannibal says. He wants to bare himself for Will, wants to let Will feast on every part of him – his seed, his flesh, his kills, he would give Will all of it if Will merely asked. He runs his hands up Will's heaving flanks, fucks up into his fist and Will moans, softly, drops his head and kisses Hannibal ravenously. Hannibal cups his face, pets through his hair when they part, and whispers, "Mo grá."

Will freezes, rearing up, his eyes wide. His hand stills on their flesh, and his other hand moves from the pillow to cup Hannibal's cheek. He stares down at Hannibal, almost in disbelief, and swallows harshly.

"Did Alana teach you that?" he asks.

Hannibal nods, and takes Will's hand, turning his head so he can kiss Will's palm. "In this language, it is 'My love'," he says, and looks to Will again. "I love you, Will."

Will gasps again, his eyes brightening, water and gold flooding them. "Yes," he whispers, his fingers trembling. He grabs the pouch still clinging to Hannibal's belt and pours more onto his fingers, coating Hannibal's cock thoroughly, and then reaches back to open himself up. He leans down and kisses Hannibal, fiercely, again, again, until neither of them can breathe properly.

He shifts forward, takes Hannibal's cock in hand and presses him, blunt, to Will's entrance. "Show me," he demands. "Show me your love."

It's not about feeding, not this time. The leftovers from the party were given to the warriors, along with raw meat for Will to consume. He isn't hungry – he wants, purely, simply wants Hannibal inside of him, to move together like man and wife do.

Hannibal growls, leans up to kiss Will again, and flattens his hands on Will's hips, pushing him down and Will moans, weakly, as Hannibal penetrates him. His inner muscles flutter, tight and blistering hot and just open enough for Hannibal to gain the first advantage. He forces Will against him, tucks his heels to the bed and thrusts up and Will gasps, head thrown back, mouth slack and eyes closed as Hannibal fucks all the way in.

"*Fuck*," he snarls, and plants his hands on Hannibal's clothed chest, before his eyes snap open and he shows his teeth, shoving at the halves of Hannibal's robes until his chest is bare. He undoes the belt, as well, parting Hannibal fully, baring them both, and rises up before sinking back down. He is strong, graceful, as he takes Hannibal all the way in again, and Hannibal rises up to meet him, ravenous as only Will can make him.

His hands burn against Will's flesh and on the inside Will is suffocatingly tight, desperate and brazen as he tightens up and moans, slack and shivering with pleasure. Hannibal wraps one hand around his cock, stroking quickly as Will whines and snarls, fucks himself on Hannibal's cock and then forward into his fist like a wild thing, uninhibited and wanton.

"Beautiful," Hannibal whispers, unable to stop himself saying that truth. Will is utterly ravishing, as relentlessly beautiful as lightning and storms, a wildfire of old magic that far predates any Roman god. He digs his nails into Hannibal's chest and claws, snarling and savage, and the bed is creaking under their weight and Hannibal is sure Will's cellmates can hear them, but he doesn't care.

"*Hannibal*," Will gasps, entire body locking up as Hannibal thrusts into him again, a new angle as Will rears back and sinks down. "Yes, *fuck*, please – *please* -."

Hannibal pushes himself upright, cupping Will at the nape, and rolls him onto his back. Will moans weakly, pawing restlessly at his shoulders, and Hannibal tucks his hands behind Will's knees, folds and bends him, and fucks in as hard as he can. Will is strong, he can take it – and Will cries out sharply, nails dug into Hannibal's neck, head tilted back to show his bruised throat as Hannibal fucks him.

Hannibal leans down, presses his shoulders to Will's calves and Will cups his face, leans up and kisses, deeply. Hannibal can feel his hunger, feel it like warmth in his own chest, and he wants to give Will everything he can. His hands wrap under Will's hips, lifting him, and Will tightens and moans loudly when he finds a good angle once more.

Will lets out a soft curse in his own language, bites Hannibal's jaw gently and clings to him. "Please," he gasps, nails dragging down Hannibal's shoulders, body going tight and frozen. One of his hands falls to his cock and strokes tight and quick, knuckles white, and Hannibal lets out a loud, pleased sound as he feels Will start to bear down around him. "Yes, *Hannibal*, fuck, show me. See how much I love you, show me, please -."

He goes quiet, and still, and Hannibal thrusts deep into him, shuddering as he releases inside of Will. Will's face goes slack with pleasure, his nostrils flaring around a sharp inhale, and it takes one more stroke for him to spill thick and wet over his own stomach. He clamps down around Hannibal so unbearably tightly, and Hannibal growls, hands flexing, hips rutting tight to keep him inside Will so that Will gets everything he can give.

Will sighs, and Hannibal collapses over him, kissing every part of Will he can reach; his shoulder, his bitten neck, his jaw which is covered in a thin, dark beard. His hips twitch in, desperate to feel every clench and shudder as Will comes down from the high, and Hannibal rears up only for long enough for Will to lower his legs, and wrap them around Hannibal's waist instead, hooking at his back.

Will smiles, sated and lax, and leans up to kiss him again. His fingers drag through the mess he made and raise to his lips so he can suck them clean, and Hannibal smiles, nuzzles Will as he does it, and then he pulls out and rolls to the side, both of them trying to catch their breath as they stare up at the ceiling.

Will takes his hand and kisses his knuckles, and rolls to his side so he can face Hannibal as Hannibal follows suit.

"You make me feel alive," he says, confession-quiet. His eyes are shining, blackened with remnants of lust, and Hannibal can see his own reflection in them. He smiles, and cups Will's face, drawing him in for another kiss. Kissing Will brings with it the same pleasure as good wine, and Hannibal feels drunk from him.

"You make me feel," he replies, simply. Before Will, life was a repetitive cycle of fighting, of sleeping, of guarding Mason and Margot and lingering like a wraith in the shadow of Rome. Will has ignited him, made him feel passion and joy again, and he imagines this is how animals feel when they first catch sight of spring sun.

Will smiles, and lets out a soft, pleased hum, sliding closer. "You must return to the villa," he says. "Before Mason wakes."

"I would rather linger a while longer," Hannibal replies.

"And I am selfish, wanting that, too, but your place isn't here." He sighs, presses his lips together, and rubs his cheek against Hannibal's palm. "You're a married man tomorrow." He frowns, and swallows. "I know it's not…what you desire, and I know it's just for show, but a dark part of me is jealous."

Hannibal understands that. He's sure, if their situations were reversed, he would feel the same. "It's just words," he says gently, and tilts his head so Will meets his eyes. "It means no more to Margot than it does to me, and when everything is done, and we are on that ship, we will be free."

"Will it not anger the gods? The Roman ones?"

Hannibal smiles. "Truthfully, I think they'd be entertained by the farce," he replies. At that, Will huffs a laugh. "Roman gods have a certain sense of humor, if all their stories are to be believed. And what we do, we are doing with the blessings of your rain, and your power, and I have seen far more of your gods than those that claim to hold dominion over Rome."

Will laughs again, his eyes brightening, returning to their normal ocean blue. "When we are free," he says quietly, "I will show you my home. I think you'll be happy there, but if you are not, we can travel further. The ocean is my friend, and we can sail for as long as we'd like. To the edge of the world."

Hannibal smiles, and pulls Will to him, embracing him tightly. "That sounds wonderful, my love."

The Roman wedding ceremony is a modest affair, with a priest, and witnesses attending. Praetor Dimmond and the lady Bedelia are present to bear witness, and Bedelia takes over the

role of Margot's mother, dressing her for the ceremony. She looks lovely, swathed in white and pale gold, the knot of Hercules around her waist to form a belt that Hannibal's right as her husband is to untie after the ceremony.

They stand before the priest, and say the words. "When and where you are Gaius, I then and there am Gaia," Margot says, and Hannibal repeats it back to her; "When and where you are Gaia, I then and there am Gaius." Hannibal knows it has some origin in the names, though he's not sure where, exactly, it came from.

"It's lucky," Margot tells him, when it is said and done. They sit, and make their offering of cake to the god Jupiter, and eat it, and when it is done, Mason stands with a crow of delight, clapping his hands together.

"Unfortunately, you don't have a house to escort her to," Mason says, "and there's hardly a need for a bedding ceremony." He adds that part with a lecherous wink at Margot, and Hannibal swallows back his growl, gently squeezing her hand. "What say you, Hannibal?"

He tilts his head.

"You'll need to be in top shape for tomorrow's fight," Mason says with a smile. "Wouldn't want to embarrass yourself in the arena, after all."

Hannibal nods. "Of course," he says, and gives Margot an apologetic smile. "By my wife's leave, I will go."

"Of course, of course!" Margot says, smiling fondly and touching his shoulder with her free hand. "There is so much to be prepared for our trip to Rome, after all. Go, I won't hear another word about it!"

"Hah! She plays the part of wife rather nicely, wouldn't you say?" Mason grins over at Anthony. "And my friends, I will not see you lacking entertainment. Name your desire and I shall see it done."

"Perhaps, if you're amiable, we might bear witness to the sparring," Bedelia says, her eyes shining and her lips curled up in a cat-like smile. "I should quite like to see what you have in store for us, Mason."

"Excellent!" Mason claps his hands together and gestures for Hannibal to leave. "Go, my friend, go play with your dogs. We shall see you there shortly."

Hannibal nods, and kisses Margot's hand for the show of it. She smiles at him, and looks happy enough, her cheeks bulging with mirth and looking somewhat relieved that they will not have to lock themselves in her room and pretend to lay together as man and wife. Hannibal lets her go, and heads to his rooms to change into an outfit suitable for sparring.

He goes down to the ludus after, and finds Doctore running the gladiators through drills, all of them in lines with heavy-looking swords in their hands, slightly different than the thick sparring swords, with girthier and sharper blades, though they are still made of wood. Hannibal nods at Jack and he calls a halt.

"Attend your master!" he yells with a crack of his whip, and they all straighten in place like soldiers. Will is at the end of the second row, his hair dark with sweat, his cheeks and chest flushed. He's not wearing one of his tunics, and his bare skin is a delicious sight.

Hannibal's stomach tenses, when he realizes Bedelia will see it, too. A sharp knot of jealousy flares, only quieted somewhat when Will catches his eye and smiles.

"My titans!" Mason calls, and Hannibal walks out to stand beside Jack as they attend. "Tomorrow you will all see yourselves in the arena, battling against the fierce Eastern warriors, who claim they can stand against Spartans!"

Some of the more raucous gladiators cheer and snarl, derisive at the idea that any man can best them. Mason's smile is wide, and at this side, Anthony and Bedelia are wearing similar anticipatory smiles.

"You will all train twice as hard today, and for as long as the sun is in the sky, so that I know you are in top form for tomorrow's fight." He nods at Jack, and Jack cracks his whip again, ordering them all to pair off. Hannibal takes a sword from the slave boy and rushes to join Will.

He claps a hand on Will's shoulder and they go to the cliffs where they normally train. Will is brilliant in the sunlight, strong and well-fed, and graceful as he slides into his ready stance. They begin their dance easily, falling in step with the same assuredness and ease as they always have.

"Is everything set?" Will asks, as Hannibal parries his blow and swings upwards to cut under his arm, only to meet Will's shoulder at his chest and stagger back, losing the momentum.

He smiles, and nods. "We shall have to take our time," he says, and ducks as Will swings for his head, kicks at his shin and sends him stumbling to one side. "Make the show last."

Will grins at him. "Aren't you always the one who says I shouldn't play with my food?" he teases, and jumps back when Hannibal lunges for him, a sharp cut of his sword sending Hannibal's blade to one side. Will grabs his hair, tugs, and forces him onto his knees. Hannibal growls, swiping at Will's ankle, grabs and yanks, sending them both stumbling to the sands.

Will lands on his back with a huff, and Hannibal scrambles upright, crawls over him and puts his sword against Will's neck. Will's eyes are dark, and he shivers, swallowing harshly. One hand goes to Hannibal's wrist, the bite hidden behind his leather bracer, and two fingers tap.

"I yield," he whispers.

Hannibal nods, and stands, helping him to his feet. Before they begin again, Hannibal catches Bedelia watching them ravenously. She's not even drinking wine, too caught up in the sight of them sparring. Her gaze is like that of a vulture waiting for the limping animal to finally die.

"If you intend to leave at dusk, we can't end the show too early," he says, tearing his gaze away and paying attention to Will instead. Will nods, and lunges, and they exchange a series of quick blows before parting again.

"I will wait for your signal," Will replies, and Hannibal smiles, pleased and amused by Will's confidence. He's sure Will is perfectly capable of making a fight last as long as his own strength holds out, and Hannibal fully intends to see him well-fed before the fight. "When you have decided, we will end it."

Hannibal's smile widens, and Will sidesteps his next attempt at a blow, brings his sword down behind Hannibal's to add its weight so he can't pull up from the swing as quickly, and he wraps his arm around Hannibal's neck, putting him in a chokehold. Hannibal growls, swings his foot in front of Will's and trips them both over, so they fall again and go rolling to the very edge of the cliffs.

Hannibal throws a hand out and stops them falling, but Will's shoulder hangs off the edge, and a soft, jagged piece of the rock breaks off, falling onto the waves below. They are calmer today, and appear much higher, but his heart races at seeing just how close they might have been to falling.

Will smiles at him, unafraid, and Hannibal pushes himself back, Will using his belt for leverage until they're a safe distance away. They stand, and Will's shoulders are tense as he slides back into a ready stance.

"I can feel her eyes on you," he says, faint discontent in his voice as they start sparring again. Hannibal huffs a laugh, delighted by Will's possessiveness. He has never had someone desire him purely for himself, as more than just a way to earn fame and gold, a well-trained dog.

"A passing glance, my love," he replies. Will blinks, eyes softening, lips twitching up in a smile. "She holds no allure for me."

Will hums, his head jerking in a dismissive shake – that was never his concern, nor should it be. He licks his lips and tightens his hand around the grip of his sword. "I wish I could show them," he confesses, as they trade another quick series of blows. Hannibal's sword knocks into Will's back as they circle each other and Hannibal hisses when he gets a hit to his thigh for his trouble, the dull *thud* of the wood against flesh echoing with those of their companions. "I want the whole world to know that you're mine."

Hannibal understands that feeling, deeply.

"Will we have to hide, in your homeland?" he asks, keeping his voice low so that they cannot be overheard.

Will smiles, wide and joyous. "No," he replies. "They will know what I am, and know what you are, and we can be together openly." Hannibal smiles. "And, if anyone does protest, I will eat their hearts."

Hannibal's smile widens, and he lifts his eyes to meet Mason's gaze. Mason is watching them shrewdly, like a man might size up a horse he wants to buy. They exchange a nod, and

Hannibal turns his attention back to Will.

"First things first, my love," he says, as Will grins and side-steps another swipe. "We must get there."

"We will. One way or another."

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry to have ended it here, but if I kept going until I wanted to the chapter would have been, like, 12k. hope you liked it! <3

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> Alright, so, warnings for this chapter.
> It is violent, graphically so. It is a *wild* ride. It also ends on a cliffhanger and a not-so-happy note, BUT I would like to remind you guys that I am stubbornly loyal to happy endings, and if there was anything major to tag for, I would have, and would have warned you all. So, yes, there's a lot going on in this chapter, but there's one chapter left and I'm not going to have dragged you guys through this whole thing just to have it end badly.
> That being said, again, this chapter is very violent, and there's angst. So. Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal hasn't been beneath the arena in preparation for a fight in…he has lost count of the years. Not since Mason and Margot were children, to be sure, and they are both in their twenties now. So, a decade? Perhaps more?

And yet, as soon as he enters it, he feels as though not a single day has passed between his last bout and this one. The air holds within it a strange undercurrent of vitality, the kind of bloodlust men share on the eve of a great fight. The air is electric, the sky dark with pending storm clouds.

"Will it rain?" he asks of Will, in one of the shadowy corners, away from the rest of Mason's fighters. Near them, Randall and Francis are in deep conversation, Garrett and Elliot and some others Hannibal never learned the names of a few more feet away. They look at Hannibal and Will as though they are gods come to Earth to show mortal men how blood should be shed.

Will smiles at him, cups his neck and kisses him, uncaring for their audience. Before they left, led in two lines with guards at the sides and back, Doctore leading the way, Hannibal had taken Will in his cell, muffled him with a hand to his mouth and made sure Will was as well-fed as Hannibal could make him. Between dawn and the hour of their march, they sat by the cliffs and entertained themselves tossing pieces of gravel and sand down, watching them fall.

When they part for air, Will's eyes are shining, and his smile is wide. He looks beautiful, strong and golden-eyed, and he plants his hand on Hannibal's chest and tilts his head upwards as though listening for the storm. It is impossible to hear over the jeers, screams, and cries of the crowds, their feet stamping down against the wooden benches as they call for blood.

Will shivers, lashes low, and steps close to Hannibal again, kisses brazen and warm along his neck and fists a hand in his tunic. Hannibal has cut his hair, for the fight, so that even in disarray it won't obscure his vision, and shaved, and wears a tunic much like Will's, the color

of red clay. Around his waist is his belt with his large knife, and his tunic falls beneath it and stops just shy of his knees. Then, boots, as he knows just how harsh the arena sands can be on bare feet – if the sun doesn't bake them, they can be torn open by rocks or glass or metal and any misstep can be the end of one's life.

"If I could, I would will this place to flood," Will says, calling Hannibal's attention to him. Hannibal turns, presses his nose to Will's thick hair, just long enough to curl but not nearly the wild mane it had been when they'd first met. He will see it grow, until he can take Will by it, twist and pull when they touch each other under the stars.

"We don't have the time for that," he replies, and Will huffs a laugh and shakes his head, pulling back with another bright smile. In every moment, Will is so full of joy, a brightness in him that Hannibal supposes can only come from his unique way of looking at the world. Before Hannibal left his home country, he thinks there was a similar brightness in him, but it has been tamped out for so long, drowned in blood. Will sets him alight.

Will licks his lips, eyes dark as they rake over Hannibal's body, and his shoulders roll. In his hand is a gladius, much like his training weapon, but this is made of steel, the handle colored gold. He has a knife like Hannibal's as well, strapped to his waist. Most of the other gladiators have swords, save the few with tridents and nets. Garrett has shown a certain affinity for the spear.

"How do fights like this go?" Will asks.

Hannibal presses his lips together. "Normally, where there is a large number of men fighting all at once, there are two types," he explains. Will nods, his head tilted, attentive. "Sometimes it is every man for himself, and all the rest must either die or yield and one can be named the victor. But we are fighting as a team. So, the goal will be to get the other side to die, or to yield."

Will frowns. "I heard Randall say it was bad to yield in the real arena," he says.

Hannibal nods. "That is true. In single combat, when a gladiator yields, his life is put into the hands of whoever is running the games. Depending on the decision and favor of the crowd, he may be given life, or sentenced to die. Generally, you must put on a very good show, if you expect to yield, and live."

Will's frown deepens. "How to they find so many men all the time?" he demands. "If they all win or die?"

"It's more complicated than I'm making it," Hannibal says with a small sigh. Will nods in understanding, and looks away, towards the other men. Hannibal's attention is drawn by a loud laugh that he recognizes as Mason, and then Will straightens in place, and they both come forward to form a ring around their master as Mason enters the small corridor just shy of the entrance to the arena.

"My titans!" he crows, clapping his hands together. "What a fine troupe you all make. I expect a good show of sport from each and every one of you." His eyes land on Hannibal, and his smile widens to show all of his teeth. "The game we have set up is a ring of fire. Once

inside it, it will be lit, and if any man is thrown out of the fire, he is forfeit a chance to win the game."

Will is nodding beside Hannibal, brow furrowed as he listens to the rules.

"I want to make this very clear," Mason continues, "if any of those Eastern dogs are still alive by the end of this, I will see each one of you lashed for failing to prove yourselves the strongest and best fighters. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, dominus," the men reply.

Mason smiles. "Good. Hannibal, I would have words with you."

Hannibal bows his head, brushing his knuckles against Will's hip, before he worms his way through the dispersing crowd and comes to a stop in front of Mason. Mason grins at him, brushing off a stray piece of nonexistent dirt from his shoulder. His hand freezes, and his head tilts, and he taps his fingers against Hannibal's neck, where Will's bite is.

His lips purse, and he lifts his eyes. "I didn't think my sister so savage," he says carefully.

Hannibal forces himself to smile. "During a spar, we might use any weapon to our advantage, brother," he says. Mason's eyes flash, instinctively, forgetting for a moment Hannibal's new status as his brother by law. His lips thin out and he hums. "Weapons, both made by man and those given to us by the gods. It is not a rare thing to be bitten or scratched in the heat of the moment."

Mason nods. "You do understand, Hannibal, that you are my sister's now," he says tightly. "You can't wet your cock in any pretty thing that strikes your fancy."

Hannibal's brows rise, and he resists the urge to reject the words as a lie. Mason said he had seen Will and Hannibal together, though he didn't specify that it was during the rain. Still, it is not important after today, what Mason thinks of him, or what he would do to Hannibal or Will if he knew the truth.

"I promise, Mason, I am as loyal to your sister as she is to me," he replies. "As we both are, to you."

Mason grins, appeased by that. A fool. He claps his hands on Hannibal's shoulders and gives a hearty laugh. "Well said, brother!" he says, and straightens up. "I'm sure you will be wonderful today. Margot wanted me to give you her best wishes. Mars willing, you will not fall."

Hannibal nods, and Mason turns away with a swirl of his robes. Then, the gate opens to the arena, and the victors from the last bout walk in, sweaty and bloodied but not grievously harmed. They grin at some of Mason's warriors as they pass, sharing a brief moment of camaraderie.

Then, it is time.

Will appears at his side, and smiles at him. He says nothing, but holds a hand out, gesturing for Hannibal to be the first into the ring.

Hannibal smiles back, and leads the charge.

The Eastern man's warriors are fierce, each armed with wicked-looking scythes and curved swords that, while not as heavy and devastating as Roman weapons, mean that they are much quicker. The ring of fire around their fighting space is large, almost the same size as Mason's ludus area. Elliot has fallen, his back split open to reveal his spine, his eyes staring out and his mouth agape. Another one of Mason's has been thrown out of the ring and stands at the edge of it, pacing and snarling like he wants to rush back in.

There are ten in total. Hannibal cut down one in the first few minutes, slicing through his neck and almost severing his head from his shoulders in one stroke. He is in a tight spar with the second, and at his back is Will, fighting a third. They move around each other like dancers, and sometimes Hannibal's opponent becomes Will's, before they switch again. Will has a smear of blood on his jaws, his mouth wet with it – Hannibal didn't see him kill his first, but there are bodies strewn across the fighting area.

Hannibal parries the man's scythe, wraps a hand around his wrist and jerks him forward. He drops his sword and grabs his knife instead, flipping it in his grip and stabbing up sharply, through the man's stomach and up into his heart. His eyes are wide, and he goes limp, falling to his knees with a gurgling breath.

Hannibal kicks him back, nose wrinkling as he falls across the fire and starts to cook. He picks up his sword and turns as Will grunts, and his breath catches as he sees Will's opponent disarm him, his sword flying from his hand and out of reach, past the fire.

Will grabs his knife, snarling, and lifts it just in time to stop a blow landing on his neck. The Eastern man growls, sensing an advantage, and Will grits his teeth, sinking to his knees, his arms trembling as he tries to get the man's sword away from his neck. Hannibal rushes to help him, but before he reaches Will, another man runs at him with a yell, and his attention is torn away.

He tries not to let it worry him – distraction is as much as a death sentence in this place as sword or spear. He hears Will give a roar of pain, the air is thick with blood and heat, the oppressive humidity of a pending storm hanging heavy all over the place. Hannibal kicks the man in the chest, sending him stumbling back, and lunges for him, wanting this to be over. This holds no pleasure for him when he's worried for Will.

In his periphery, he sees Garrett fall, a deep cut on his thigh and then his side as he collapses to the ground, his spear discarded. Another man is caught in a net and gets stabbed to death by one of Mason's. This is chaos, discordant and inelegant. There is no glory here.

The roar of the crowd is deafening, drowning out even his own heartbeat. The man he's fighting rises, sword slicing through the air and Hannibal grits his teeth, his wrist jarred at the heavy blow to his sword. He jerks back and the man lunges for him with another yell, only to fall as Francis comes up behind him and slams his sword through the man's back, hard enough that the tip splits through his chest.

The man falls, and Hannibal breathes out, giving Francis a nod of thanks. He receives a toothy grin in answer, and then he turns, surveying the rest of the massacre. Several of Mason's men have fallen, but Randall, Francis, Hannibal, and Will remain. So, too, do three of the Eastern men, counting the one still in a match with Will.

Hannibal strides over to Garrett's discarded spear. He takes it in hand and looks to Will. Catches his eye.

Will grins at him, and ducks as his opponent swings for his neck. Hannibal twists the spear in his grip and throws it, catching the man in the stomach, the force of his throw enough to send him outside of the ring of fire with a scream of agony.

Will straightens with a heavy breath, running his hand through his hair. He is shining with sweat, his side coated in a thick stream of blood, his knuckles bruised, and his knees torn open and gritted with sand. He winces when he straightens, pressing his hand to his side, but he is still standing, and that's all Hannibal can hope for.

Will's eyes snap to him, and widen, and he lets out a yell of alarm. Hannibal turns just in time for another Eastern man to leap at him, but then there is Will, a wild blur of red and gold, and he slams his shoulder into the man's chest, knocking him to the ground. He snarls, and grabs the man's head, snapping his neck with a brutal sound. He leans down, and sinks his teeth into the man's flesh, ripping his throat open as the body convulses beneath him.

The crowd screams, eager as anything to see Will keep his namesake as the devourer of man.

There is one man left, in a fierce grapple with Randall. They have both lost their weapons and are rolling on the ground, trading blows. Randall's face is a mess of bruises, his nose broken and off-kilter, his mouth stained with blood and one eye so swollen Hannibal doubts he can see out of it. He stands by Will, allowing him to eat, and Francis is prowling around the fighting pair, ready to leap to his friend's defense should Randall be overcome.

Hannibal looks up. In the master's box is Mason, Margot, Bedelia, and Anthony. He does not see Alana, though he knows she accompanied them there. Margot's face is pale, and she meets Hannibal's eyes and offers him a thin smile.

Then, her eyes move to Will, and Hannibal turns his head to see Will watching her. Will swallows, standing, and nods to her, and she nods back, and disappears from sight.

There is a sharp cry, and Randall stands from the body of his opponent. The man's skull has been caved in, and Randall's hands are wet with blood. The four of them stand, the only remaining fighters aside from the single man who had been thrown outside of the ring.

"Hannibal," Will whispers, and Hannibal looks to him. "You must be ready to run."

Before Hannibal can reply, Mason stands, his arms spread out wide and a smile on his face as the crowd quiets. "A tremendous show of sport!" he cries, and the crowd cheers. "And now, my friends, you have seen the glory of my titans, and you have shared in their conquest. I have one final treat for you – a fight to the death, to see who amongst my warriors is the strongest and most fierce!"

Hannibal's eyes widen, and he looks up. Mason's smile is feral, his eyes alight, and he grins down at Hannibal. And Hannibal understands.

Mason had no intention of letting his ludus survive this day.

He looks to Francis and Randall, finds them breathing hard and staring back at Hannibal and Will, a mix of grim determination and franticness on their faces. It is no secret who the more vicious pair is, but if Francis is smart, he will use Randall as bait to try and take down Hannibal and Will before fighting them alone.

They form a square. Randall is staring at Will, his good eye wide, his posture tucked like a feral animal ready to lunge. Will smiles at him. It starts to rain.

Hannibal looks up. They all do, for they know the power in the rain. A heavy rumble of thunder rolls across the sky, and it almost, *almost*, covers the sound of one part of the stands collapsing. Hannibal's eyes snap to it, and widen at the sound of screams. From the pit rises a great pile of smoke and ash, fire eating at the edges of the hole by the gate.

Will grabs his arm, startling him, and turns to Randall and Francis. "Come!" he yells in the language of the Rhine. "Come with me."

They flee towards the gate, towards the fire. The gate is raised, and as they pass through, Hannibal sees Alana, her hands covered in ash and her perfume tainted with the smell of pitch and oil. He smiles at her, relieved beyond measure, and she nods to him and they all run up to the main area, and out into the streets.

"Where is Margot?" Hannibal asks.

"She has gone to the docks," Alana replies, breathless. "We must hurry."

Hannibal nods. Some of the guards at the entrance, who wear Anthony's crest, leap for them, but are quickly felled. The man who was thrown outside the ring falls with them. They follow Will as he sprints down the streets, civilians darting out of their way with frantic cries. Behind them, despite the rain, the fire roars and there is a great exodus from the arena.

Will stops at a crossroad, and turns to them. "Go to the docks," he tells Alana, Francis, and Randall. "Board our mistress' ship. We will join you later."

They nod, and turn towards the docks, while Will makes for the ludus.

"Will," Hannibal argues, reaching out and taking his arm, pulling him to a halt. "What is this madness? We must go."

"You told me any slave that betrays his master will forfeit the lives of all the rest," Will says. "What of Jack? The slave boy, and the rest of them? They should all get a chance to live, or at least to know what awaits them if they stay."

Hannibal frowns, unmoving, and Will lets out a sharp huff, fights his arm free, and pulls Hannibal into a kiss that tastes of blood. His hand slides down to Hannibal's belt and he takes the ludus key.

"Go with the others if you must," he says. "I will not abandon them."

Then, he leaves. Hannibal watches them go, uncaring for the panicked people fleeing around him. The rain is cold, soaking him to the bone, and he shivers when the sky turns very dark. The sea will be choppy, the waves high. They don't have *time* for this.

But there was never a choice. Hannibal snarls to himself, tightens his grip on his sword, and follows.

The ludus is eerily quiet, unguarded, as all of the guards had been tasked with escorting the warriors to the arena that morning. All that exists is the rush of the rain, the rumble of thunder, and the distant screams and cries of a city in panic as the arena burns down.

He enters, sword drawn, and spies no movement. There are no shadows creeping below the balcony, no slaves scurrying about upstairs. He goes through the ludus gates and upstairs, resisting the urge to call out for Will. He can smell blood, and there are droplets of dark red on the floor, he assumes from Will's wounds. Anxiety curls up in his chest behind his heart, and he prowls up through the ludus, past the kitchens and his room, and freezes when he sees the main area.

It is a pool of blood, the water colored red, bodies of slaves scattered around the place with their throats cut. The slave boy, the kitchen staff, the house slaves. It looks like they were all rounded up and slaughtered.

Worse still, is the fact that around the room stand soldiers, Mason's and Anthony's personal guard. They stand without moving, but their eyes are on Hannibal and their swords are drawn, every one of them stained with blood.

From the entrance leading to the antechamber and the balcony, Mason emerges. He is smiling widely, his hands clasped in front of him. Behind him, her face pale and streaked with tears, stumbles Margot, held by Jack. Anthony and Bedelia make up the last.

Hannibal snarls, and the guards' hands tighten on their swords.

"Oh, Hannibal," Mason sighs. Hannibal swallows, straightening, and his eyes sweep over the pile of bodies. There is one solace – he does not see Will among them. "I must say, you are full of surprises, my old friend."

"As are you," Hannibal replies. Mason must have known, he must have. His head start wouldn't have been much greater than Hannibal's or Will's.

"All your little whispers, your secret meetings. I'm impressed – really, I am. I never figured you the kind of person to entertain such reckless thoughts." Hannibal presses his lips together, his eyes meeting Margot's. Jack doesn't have his whip, nor any weapons. His eyes are dark on Hannibal's face, warning him against doing anything foolish.

"But! I'm not one to hold onto one lapse in judgement," Mason adds with a wide grin. "You're my brother by law, after all, and I know you wouldn't do anything that would injure your family." Hannibal swallows, chin lifting as Margot covers her mouth, her hands shaking. "It is our duty as men to make sure the family line is extended, after all. I can't be rid of you until my sister gives us an heir."

Hannibal presses his lips together, nostrils flaring, and he straightens and sheaths his sword. "Of course," he says. "You're right."

Mason grins. "Naturally, I can't let you just go off on your own so often, but I'm sure there will be plenty of entertainment for you in a Roman cell. Come! We must be ready to leave."

The six guards closest to Hannibal all turn to him, and Hannibal raises his chin. He could kill two of them easily, quickly, before any raised their swords. Four to one odds aren't good, especially when the other men have armor and he does not, but he has faced worse.

"Oh, before I forget!" Mason says, and the guards part so Hannibal can see his face. "Where's your dog, Hannibal?"

Hannibal swallows, and his nostrils flare.

"It doesn't matter, I suppose. We'll find him." He turns, and jerks his head towards Jack, who nods and leaves, past Hannibal and down towards the ludus. Several of the guards follow him, and as he passes, Hannibal meets his eyes. Jack has always been loyal to Mason, to a fault, and his expression is stony and grave, like he's already stuck a sword through Hannibal's heart. "As well as all the others that have fled to your little boat, and -."

With a sudden shriek of outrage, Margot grabs Anthony's sword, pulling it free. She stumbles into the pool, the red water soaking up to her calves, and holds the sword in both hands, pointing it shakily towards Mason.

A guard lunges forward but Mason stops him with a raised hand and a snarl. "No one lay a hand on her," he hisses, and then he turns to Margot. "Come, come, now, Margot, let's not do anything stupid."

"Shut up," Margot hisses. Her eyes are bright and she jabs towards Mason, before swinging the sword in a wide arc around her. The nearest guards step back, not daring to disobey Mason's order or attack their mistress. "Just -." She rounds on Mason again and bares her teeth. "Just fucking shut up for once in your life."

Mason grins at her, stepping towards her, and Anthony's sword is ornamental, but that means it's heavy, and Margot is a slim thing. Her arms are shaking from the weight of the weapon and she steps back through the red water, until her heel hits the opposite step, and Mason circles the pool, prowling towards her.

"Hannibal and I are *leaving*," she snaps.

Outside, thunder rumbles and there is a flash of lightning that illuminates the bloody space, and Hannibal hears Jack yelling from below.

He reaches out, noting that the guards tense, but do not attack, as he takes a hold of Margot's arm and draws her to his chest. He takes the sword from her, much more capable of using it, and Mason goes still, his face black with anger.

"You won't get far," he snarls.

"I'll take my chances," Margot replies. She grips Hannibal tightly and tugs him back, towards the door. Hannibal knows as soon as Mason deems it safe, he will order them to pursue. They barely make it a few steps before he hears Mason hollering for Jack, the guards downstairs, and the guards above to hunt Hannibal down.

"Where is Alana?" Margot asks breathlessly. "Is she safe?"

"She went with Francis and Randall to the docks," Hannibal replies. He pulls her close, stopping her short before they can round a corner, and he leans out, looking one way, then the other, before he nods for her to go towards the kitchens and his personal room. She goes without hesitation, a smart girl, knowing Hannibal is her best chance to get out of this. "There is a ship, yes?"

"Yes," she says with a frantic nod. "The captain has strict orders not to leave until I give the word." Hannibal nods, a hand on her back as he guides her into the kitchens. It is not a room he knows well, but there is another corridor behind it where the slave quarters are. "Hannibal, where is Will?"

"I don't know," he growls, ears pricked for any movement ahead of them, but he can find none. Guards are rushing towards them from the other side of the kitchen door. "We must hurry."

She nods, and they run past the wide tables and dead fires, towards the back door. There is a heavy padlock across it and Margot hisses, jerking at the thing and letting it drop with a loud 'clang'. "Damn it!" Hannibal huffs, and gestures for her to step aside, before he twists Anthony's sword in his grip and drives the tip of the handle against the lock. The sound it makes is terribly loud, and Margot's head snaps to the door.

"They're in here!" someone yells. "The kitchens!"

"*Fuck*," Margot hisses.

Hannibal presses his lips together, drives the handle against the lock again, and then the kitchen doors open and four guards pour inside, their swords drawn. They are all nameless, faceless men, but Hannibal can hear Jack yelling close by. It sounds like there's a fight going on.

There is a window, by the door, which looks out to the ludus, and the sky lights up in a flash of lightning as the four men stare at Hannibal.

Again, four to one isn't awful, but these are tight quarters and he has Margot to consider, now.

The kitchen is made up of a narrow walkway down the center, with an aisle on either side, heavy wooden tables making up obstacles and pots and pans hanging from hooks planted in the ceiling. If Hannibal can make use of the barriers, he could probably do some damage with the pots, and there is a shelf of knives that is closer to him and Margot than the other four.

His hand tightens on his sword. He really doesn't like these odds, but he's made do with worse.

The bravest of the men lunges, and Hannibal grits his teeth and lifts his sword to block the swing. The guard lets out a yell and jabs his fist into Hannibal's side, winding him, and Hannibal staggers back, grips his sword with both hands and swings with a vicious uppercut that goes between the man's legs, hard enough to completely split his leg, and he screams and falls with a heavy slump.

Then, there is another yell, and Hannibal looks up.

There is more blood than bare skin on Will, now, as he tears through the neck of the man at the back of his group, a fountain of blood spraying out from the man's throat and coating his face, his hands, and his neck. The remaining two guards go pale, and one of them drops his sword and falls to his knees, hands lifted in surrender.

Will is on him next, with a snarl and a snap of his teeth. He grips the man's skull and twists his head so that he ends up facing backwards, and then the last man is taken down by Hannibal as he steps up behind him and slits his throat with his knife. A mercy killing.

Will straightens from his last kill, and there is no blue in his eyes. He is rabid, feral, a snarling beast and so wet and red. He snarls at Hannibal and Hannibal is reminded of the first time Will had killed a man in front of him, how Hannibal was the one to approach him, to put a hand on his head and soothe him back from the edge of such stark hunger.

"Will," he says carefully, and Will shows his teeth, they are so red, clots of flesh stuck in the corners of his mouth, under his nails. He takes a step towards Hannibal, stalking and hunched, his eyes dropping to Hannibal's neck. His tunic has been shredded by claws and swords, and Hannibal cannot tell which blood is Will's and which is not, but there is a wide gash in his side and one of his shoulders looks subtly off-socket.

"Will," he says again, and Will snarls, his nostrils flaring. "My love, we must go."

Will blinks at him, blinks again. He swallows, his fingers flexing by his sides, and breathes in deeply, head tilted just so, like a bird with a broken neck.

He closes his eyes, and whispers, "Hannibal."

"I'm here," Hannibal replies, though he does not approach.

Will licks his lips, breathes in again, coughs around his own tongue. His belly is distended from eating so much and he pets lightly over his stomach, wincing. He turns his head and spits a mouthful of bloody saliva onto the nearest body, and then there are sounds of more guards coming, and he snaps around, snarling.

Hannibal looks behind him and gestures for Margot to take his hand. She does, carefully sidestepping the bodies, and they leave the kitchens and head towards the ludus.

Will freezes at the gate, fingers curling between the bars and peering out. Hannibal can't see anyone, and after a moment Will huffs, carefully pushing the gate open, and prowls out into the covered walkway. Hannibal follows behind.

The sand is dark from rainwater and Will steps out onto it, his head tilted up, his face slack with something like relief to have it fall on him. The water washes away the dirt and blood on him, reveals a deep series of bruises around his off-angle shoulder, the jagged edge of his wounded side – the same side that was pierced before, and will create a twin scar when it is healed.

He looks out, towards the cliffs, and Hannibal follows his gaze. They cannot see the docks from here, but the water looks alive, rolling up like a great mass of serpents dwells just beneath the waves, ready to rise up and devour them.

Margot digs her nails into Hannibal's arm, her eyes wide and fixed behind them, towards the stairs. "They're coming," she whispers.

Hannibal nods, and pulls her out towards Will. "We have to go," he says.

Will turns to him, and then his eyes snap up, and he bares his teeth in a vicious snarl, stalking closer to the center of the sands. Hannibal follows, lifts his eyes to see Mason standing there with Bedelia and Anthony, his face as stormy as the sea.

Below, Jack and the guards have found them, and are spreading out from the gate.

Will reaches out and gently touches Hannibal's wrist, and when Hannibal looks at him, Will's gaze is still focused up. "Go," he whispers.

Hannibal frowns, and shakes his head. "No," he replies. "We can't leave without you."

Will blinks, his lashes wet, and his lips twitch in a smile. "It's a small price to pay," he says. "You must get Margot out. You *must*, Hannibal. She won't make it to the ship without you."

Margot lets out a quiet, desperate sound, and Hannibal's stomach tightens. This cannot be. He can't *leave* Will. But he can't leave Margot, either. He wonders if Will knew this would

happen. He wonders if anything could have been done to change that.

Will doesn't have his weapons, so Hannibal hands him Anthony's sword, since he still has his large knife, and his own blade from the arena. Will takes it with a smile, grins wide, and nods to Margot, once.

"Take care of him for me," he says, and in his golden eyes there is no sadness, there is no sorrow, but the heavens are weeping for him, and there is water on his face that Hannibal is sure cannot be blamed on the rain.

He growls under his breath, wants to reach for Will and demand he stop this madness, demand that they all try to fight their way free or die trying. But the ship will not leave without Margot, and there is Alana and her child to consider. If they die, she's next, as well as Francis and Randall. Maybe even the ship captain, if Mason feels so inclined.

"Don't die," he tells Will, and Will laughs, and turns away, sets his sights on Mason and lifts his sword.

"Go now, Hannibal," he replies. Margot tugs on his arm, and they run towards the open gates that lead onto the main street. One guard tries to run for them but Hannibal cuts him down quickly, and then Will is there, blocking the way, and the sound of clashing steel and Will's snarls echoes behind them like the rumble of thunder.

Margot is sobbing, though it's quiet, not enough air to run and grieve. They flee to the docks, and as they run, the rain abruptly stops, and the sky clears. He doesn't want to think about what that means.

"Hannibal."

There is a touch on his arm, and he shrugs it off with a low snarl. His fingers curl on the side of the ship and he stares, and stares, at the docks. They are anchored a small way off – close enough that Hannibal can pick out the people as they mill around, but not so close that they can be boarded, or set upon without warning.

"Hannibal," Margot says again. "We must leave." It is nightfall, now. The sun was setting as they got to the ship. Alana and Margot had embraced, tears in their eyes, and Randall and Francis had shared with Hannibal a long, silently sympathetic look. Men like them understand what it means when a brother falls.

"A moment more," Hannibal says. The torches shine brightly like fireflies in his homeland. He tries to remember if Will ever mentioned similar bugs. His fingers curl tighter, knuckles white. Gods, is it even worth going there, without Will?

He must, for Alana, for Margot. But then, what?

"Hannibal," Margot says again, more urgently.

Hannibal sighs, closes his eyes and bows his head. She touches his arm again, soft, fingers chilly, and he flattens his hand over hers, squeezing gently. He lifts his head and looks at her and she offers him a thin smile.

"We have to leave," she says gently. "The captain tells me we'll lose the tide and the wind if we linger much longer."

Hannibal sighs. Though he wants to remain, and keep watch, Will would never forgive him if he sacrificed Margot and Alana's safety for the sake of a few extra seconds, searching for something that will not come.

He looks to Margot again, and gives her a nod of acceptance. "Let's go," he says, and she trembles, and leans in to rest her cheek on his shoulder for a moment, before she lets him go, and moves to the captain to give the order to raise anchor and set sail.

Hannibal cannot tear his gaze from the docks. He watches, and watches, and still nothing, nothing comes, and he wants to curse the sky, and the ocean, and demand of the gods what kind of sick game they are playing. If he were able, he would run back to the ludus, rewind time, and fall with Will. Perhaps, together, they could have survived.

Perhaps, in some other world, they did.

The rest of the crew and his companions know to give him a wide berth, but even then, as the ship begins to move with a sharp lurch and they hug the coast, headed on a course that takes them by the small slip of stone that makes up Mason Verger's ludus, Randall and Francis flank Hannibal at the edge of the ship, and they all look up.

Hannibal sees the cliff, and from down here it looks so much shorter, like the water is lifting them, cupped hands for a pool of rain. Hannibal swallows, and then his eyes widen, and he turns to the captain.

"Take us closer!" he shouts.

The man frowns at him, but obeys, steering the ship towards the bottom of the cliffs. And Hannibal can confirm what he sees; the stone is broken in places, and stained with blood and parts of bodies. He sees a shining strip of golden cloth around a single leg, a woman's leg – Bedelia. The rest of her body is smeared along the side of the cliffs.

Near her, as Hannibal looks down and sees a dark shape bobbing in the water, is Anthony. Or, at least, pieces of him. Hannibal recognizes clumps of his grey hair and the whiteness of his robes.

Though he does not see Jack's body, he sees Jack's whip, and pieces of guards. There is a thick waterfall of blood that appears fresh, still-dripping from the top of the cliffs.

Francis lifts his chin. "He fought well," he murmurs.

Hannibal swallows, and hates the fact that Mason's body is not among the ruins. Hates the idea that he might still be alive, when Will is not.

"Yes," he breathes, and his chest is tight and his lungs ache, he aches, like starvation and desperate need. Is this how Will felt, on the ship to this damned land, famished and feral and hungry? Is this how he will feel for the rest of his life?

"When we are ashore, we can have a feast, and toast to his memory," Randall suggests, his words somewhat slurred from the damage done to his face. Hannibal nods, swallowing harshly. "What did your people believe happened to men when they die?"

"I don't remember," Hannibal replies. His parents had never been particularly religious – they regarded the gods as citizens of a neighboring village. They might venture between each other, and know some souls in the other place, but they hardly had a marked effect on their daily lives.

"He is in the ocean," Francis says. Hannibal blinks, and looks at him, finds him staring at the dark waves as they rush up, caressing the sides of the boat and turning white at the tip as they turn from the cliffs, out towards open water. "And in the rain."

At that, Hannibal smiles. They leave him be, and though the wind is cold, and the sky is dark, Hannibal doesn't go below deck. The water spray clings to his arms, soaks through his clothes, until he is sodden, and shivering.

At some point, they sail back into the storm, and though the clouds appear fierce, the rain is gentle. Hannibal closes his eyes, tilts his head up, and sighs.

Chapter End Notes

I'm hoping to get the last chapter out before I go to RDC, or at the very least before this weekend. I won't keep you hanging long! <3

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

/screaming into the void.
holy halibut my dudes, this was way longer than I intended it to be, but here you have it! The final chapter.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxjvNUNXhkU - this song is the vibe I get about halfway through this chapter when they start singing. the lyrics, of course, don't match the historical timeline but just the vibe/chorus is very nice and gives me a lot of feels.

I also wanted to say that the geographical accuracy is mmm...so-so, but if you can forgive the historical inaccuracy I figure it's not a big deal xD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They sail for more days than Hannibal cares to count. Though he doesn't want to, it is truth that he, Alana, and Francis are the only ones in plain enough garb and uninjured enough to go out into the docks and shores of the places they stop at for food and supplies. Francis, it seems, speaks every language they encounter, and though Hannibal is loathe to be parted from the sea for more than a moment, and he cannot take delight in any of the boisterous, vibrant markets, he travels with Alana to make sure she remains safe. Margot had stashed away some jewels and coins, so they are not wanting for anything they need.

Between those times, though, Hannibal is on the deck of the ship, staring out to where the sky meets the edge of the ocean. He sleeps at the back of the ship, close to the rudder, and unless they need his help with tightening ropes, hauling heavy objects, or going ashore, no one bothers him.

It is a strange thing. His sister is the only person in Hannibal's living memory he has mourned the loss of this much. Even his parents, good souls that they were, did not take up so vast a space inside Hannibal's chest. He feels cavernous, and frail, like a great beast has clawed out everything behind his ribs and now he simply cannot exist without salt in his lungs and drying out his skin. He does not entertain thoughts of following Will into the ocean depths, where they might find peace together in whatever afterlife is the real one – he doesn't think Will, with all his joy and his life, would appreciate such dark thoughts.

On one day, Hannibal spies Alana and Francis in animated conversation, and the wind brings him their voices, and he recognizes the soft, poetry-like cadence of Will's language, and the longing and ache spear him so sharply that he is robbed of breath for a long while.

Denied any true desire or means of distraction, Hannibal has a lot of time to think, and finds himself analyzing, relentlessly, the events of that day. He had begged Will to be open with him about his plans, but the fire, and the intention to rescue the slaves had come as surprises.

He doesn't want to think that Will knew he would die. He doesn't want to believe that Will would intend their last words, their last sights of each other, to be amidst ruin and blood and panic.

Perhaps if Hannibal had simply knocked him out and carried him to the ship. But, no, Margot would not have been there, and they would have had to go back for her. Perhaps if Hannibal had taken Will with them in the kitchens, kept beating the lock and snuck out through the slave quarters. But, no, Will was wild with bloodlust then, and the corridors there are narrow and it would have been too easy to become trapped, once their location was known. And, if Mason could not find them in the ludus, he would have sent his guards straight to the docks to cut them off before they could board the ship.

Perhaps if, before everything, Hannibal had begged Will to leave with him. He could sneak out one man, one man is easy to hide away. Hannibal had enough money, and as a freed man could have claimed to someone who didn't know better that Will was his own. Before the brand. Before Cordell.

But that would have required the gift of foresight, and Alana and Margot would still be suffering. How could Hannibal have known he would have been so ensnared, so enraptured, so utterly consumed with love for a creature who is more like a god than a man?

Perhaps Hannibal could have stayed, bought Margot time by planting himself at the entrance to the ludus and simply hoped that she got to Francis and Randall before she was caught, but *gods*, no, the chances of that turning sour were far too great, and Will would have never forgiven him for denying the gods their will.

"It is a small price to pay," he had said. He had told Margot her price – the death of her brother and the destruction of his ludus. Perhaps Hannibal should have realized that, as part of the ludus under the property of Roman law, Will meant himself as well.

He breathes out, and rubs his hands over his face, grimacing at the cling of salt to his dry skin. He should drink some water – or better yet, wine, and drown in it until he cannot feel much of anything anymore – but the idea of rising and searching for some seems more trouble than it's worth.

A shadow crosses his periphery, and he looks up to see Alana. She is smiling at him, dressed no longer in Roman slave garb, but a heavy green shawl made of wool that wraps around her shoulders and falls down to her knees. She kneels, and offers him water in a skin. He takes it with a grateful smile, tipping it up to drink.

"The captain told Margot we should be in Hibernia within a fortnight," she tells him.

Hannibal nods, and takes another drink. "And what then?" he asks.

Alana presses her lips together, and settles with a sigh next to him, her back against the side of the ship. She takes the water from him and drinks, her other hand resting on her stomach. Hannibal doesn't think it unlikely that she will have begun to show by the time they land.

"We will be landing on the Eastern shore," she says. "Some miles North of Eblana."

Hannibal nods, though he has no idea where that is, or what the significance of such a place might be.

"From there, we will have to acquire horses, and a wagon for our supplies. Then, we will journey North."

"And what is North?" Hannibal asks.

She looks to him, frowning, her head tilted. "Did Will never tell you about his home?" Hannibal presses his lips together, and tries not to wince at the mention of him. He shakes his head instead, for even remembering Will's words, the look in his eyes when he'd remembered home, the ache in his voice as he'd stared out to the ocean and wept for his lost green land, hurts to think about. He takes the water back from her, drinking again. She gives him a kind smile, and pats his thigh. "Well, I suppose it doesn't matter. But I know where we must go." She pauses, and Hannibal looks at her. "Will you come with us?"

Hannibal sighs through his nose, and nods. "Yes," he replies.

"Thank you," Alana murmurs, and offers him a thin smile. "I won't pretend I know what you're feeling right now. I can only imagine. But I am very glad that you are with us."

Hannibal's lips twitch upwards, unable to help it, and he sighs and runs his free hand through his hair. "You are my dearest friend, Alana," he tells her, and that is the truth. "And, well, I suppose I would consider you family, now. I will not be parted from you unless there is no other choice."

Her eyes brighten with her smile, and she leans in to give him a quick, warm hug. Startled, but pleased, he embraces her in return, and she straightens up and stands. He holds the waterskin out to her but she shakes her head.

"Keep it," she says. "There is plenty more."

Hannibal doesn't argue. Even the brief conversation with her and the refreshing cool drink on his tongue has revitalized him somewhat, and he sighs, tipping his head back and looking upwards. The sky is cloudless, a dazzling blue. How dare such a beautiful day shine down on them, when Will is not here to enjoy it.

The captain makes good on his promise, and anchors them off the coast of a small fishing village, far removed from any other town from what Hannibal can see. He is struck, immediately, by how amazingly *green* the land is, the rolling hills that lift up as gently as the rise and fall of a breathing chest. It is not a color he thinks could be real, pale and shining in the sun, and makes Hannibal feel as though he is staring at jewels, not grass.

But no, it is real. The wind is soft as he rows ashore with Alana, Margot, Francis, and Randall, the captain joining them with his crew in a second boat, so they can take both back

to their ship. Margot hands him a hefty bag of coin and the man nods, grins wide and wishes them safe travels.

The village is small, with houses made of stone and straw plastered with mud to give them cover from the rain. It is such a stark contrast to the shadow of Rome, where every building was the color of sand, the tiles of clay, the unnaturally colored mosaics. There is something unabashedly real around this land, and when Hannibal helps the ladies ashore and feels the ocean soak into his boots as he pushes the boat back out, captain and crew in, he cannot help thinking of Will.

A woman approaches them, her hair the same dark brown of Alana's, her eyes green and wide. She stops at the edge of the shore, dressed in warm clothing that make her appear more wolf than woman. Hannibal is sure they make an odd sight, as he, Francis, and Randall are still dressed as though warriors, and they are all obviously strangers here.

Alana calls to the woman in the Hibernian tongue, and the woman blinks at her, expression softening, and closes the final way so that they might speak freely. After a moment, she turns and gestures for them to follow as the woman turns around and walks up the small strip of beach that is more gravel and stone than sand, towards the grass verge, and up into the village.

Hannibal, Francis, and Randall take on the task of hauling their supplies, though even with the five of them it is not much. The woman leads them down what Hannibal assumes is the main street, and the ground is slick with mud from a recent rain, there's so much *water* everywhere. After so long under Roman rule he cannot remember seeing so much of it, such vivid life springing up everywhere, and he understands, deeply, how Will could have missed a place such as this.

The woman leads them into a hut, speaking softly and gesturing towards a thick pile of furs and cloaks. Alana nods to them, and then holds out a hand for Margot's money. "She says we can take as many as we need," Alana says, and Hannibal nods, glad for the opportunity to add more layers. The garb of a gladiator is certainly not enough for a place this cold.

They each grab enough clothing to be warm, for the five of them, and Alana thanks the woman and carefully pours out a bag of jewels. Hannibal must assume they already decided on which ones the woman will take, for she picks out three quickly and stuffs them into her pelt, grinning widely and giving Alana a nod.

Alana smiles at her, and they all turn and leave. "There is a place we can buy horses, a few miles inland of here," she says. "We can make it before nightfall if we hurry."

"Where are we going?" Randall asks, as they shoulder their bags and begin the long trek down the dirt road away from the village.

Alana smiles, and meets Hannibal's eyes, before she says, "Home."

Hannibal doesn't know how he will ever be used to this place. The very air vibrates against his skin, the wet squelch of mud, the unending greenness and blueness and dark, dark browns. It is a masterpiece of color and life, and Hannibal remembers how it had felt to feel the ache of the earth beneath his hands, the ache of Will. Here, he feels full, that cavern in his chest abruptly sprouting flowers and vines, choking him. He could burst from the feeling of life and love coming up from the ground, and he doesn't know if there lingers in him some magic from Will, but he cannot deny his companions seem similarly affected. Even when the trek proves tiring, and the heavens open up and douse them with rain, everyone is in good humor. They are drunk on freedom, alive with promises ahead, and Hannibal doesn't think he has seen any of them smile this much.

Their remaining jewels buy three ponies, and they are strong, sure-footed things, two grey, the third a dappling of black and grey like sunlight on stone. Hannibal rides the dappled one, with Margot sitting behind him. Alana and Randall take the second, and Francis gets the third to himself, though they burden that animal with most of their luggage in the interest of fairness.

They ride easily, following some star alignment or compass direction only Alana seems to know, and they pass the occasional village where they might stop for shelter and food, and fields that are full of cloud-like sheep with black faces and ever-chewing mouths, and big cows that croon at them as they pass, and shaggy dogs that might trot with them for a time, before returning to their herd.

Hannibal decides, when they are all settled wherever Alana has deemed they should go, and he is certain they will be safe, he will wander this land forever, and make sure he has seen every lake, every mountain, and every field. This is the land that gave him Will, and he thinks, if he were to choose anywhere to grow old and fade away, it would be here.

Before them juts a single mountain, rising and falling like the arched back of a cat, the peak of it tipped with white – snow, lingering in spring. Hannibal dimly recalls the sensation of snow, the chill of it and the sinking silence that comes with heavy snowfall. Below them lies a valley, filled with a long-stretching and still lake, and around the edge of the lake in the shadow of the mountain, there is a single cluster of huts. Stone huts, from what Hannibal can see, forming a circle, and in the center is a fire large enough that even from this distance, he can see it.

Alana breathes out, clutching the reins of her horse, her eyes wet as she rubs at her mouth. "There it is," she whispers.

Hannibal frowns, for he doesn't see anything particularly important or enthralling about this place. There is a forest, coloring the base of the mountain a deep green, the lake looks large enough that crossing it would take a while even on horseback, and he cannot imagine the little cluster of houses is home to more than a dozen people.

Alana clicks her tongue, and they begin their trek downwards.

Night has fallen and the air is cold as they finally reach a small fence, set up around the houses. They dismount their horses and the animals bluster, and Hannibal can see the large bonfire, blazing brightly. There is laughter, and the scent of roasting meat.

Margot shifts her weight uneasily, and looks to Alana. "What now?"

Alana swallows, and cups her hands to her mouth, and calls something in the Hibernian tongue. At once, the laughter stops, and shadows mill around the fire, first one man, then a woman, then two more men. Hannibal clenches his fist and resists the urge to reach for his sword, but he casts a look to Francis and Randall and receives nods in answer – they know how badly things can turn, and are ready.

There emerges from the little group a single man, and though he is older than Hannibal by many years, the brilliant blue of his eyes and his thick, curling hair is so familiar. His hair is braided at each side, wrapped at the base of his neck, and falls to between his shoulders. He has a beard that is sprayed with salt to mark his age. His eyes bear deep, deep smile lines at the edges.

He regards them each in turn, one brow lifting, the expression *so* familiar. Hannibal's chest is tight and aches, for he is certain that he is looking at none other than Will's father, and what remains of his tribe from the famine that drove him to Rome in the first place.

The man smiles at them, thinly, polite. He replies to Alana, and Hannibal again curses that he did not have enough time to learn the language, so he has no idea what they're saying. But Alana is speaking with animated hands, and then she gestures to Hannibal, and says "Will" and a word Hannibal recognizes – 'Ceangailteach'.

'Binding'. Bound.

The man's eyes snap to Hannibal, and his lips thin out, pressed together so that his beard almost obscures his mouth. He hums, and lifts his chin, and Hannibal bears his gaze steadily – he will not be cowed, but he does not wish to challenge, either.

The man's eyes run over the five of them again, and then his shoulders tense, and his eyes turn deep and dark. "Will?" he asks, and only asks. He looks to Hannibal again. "Will?"

Hannibal swallows, every part of him aching and heavy, and shakes his head.

The man does not sob, he does not bend under the weight of his grief, but silently tears fall from his eyes, and around him, his companions have expressions of deep loss on their faces. Then, the man straightens, swallows, and gestures for them to come into the ring of houses.

He says another thing, and Hannibal looks to Alana for translation. "He says they will celebrate Will's life, tonight, and that we are all welcome here for as long as we wish to stay."

Hannibal nods, grateful for that. Alana's stomach is now growing outward with her child, and too much riding from now on would be uncomfortable for her, if not potentially dangerous to the baby. Hannibal will be the first to admit his knowledge of how a woman's body changes with child, the different needs and necessities, is limited at best, but he is certain that a saddle is no place for a woman bringing life into the world.

He is glad they found this place.

They turn out the horses in a section of fenced-in grass behind the ring of houses, near the mountain, and there is space in Will's father's house for them all to sleep, though it is as a pile on the floor for now. Hannibal doesn't mind. They share the meat from what Hannibal thinks might be a goat, and after so long on salted rations the meat is eagerly welcomed.

Between Francis, Margot, and Alana, the language barrier is fairly easily overcome. Hannibal learns that Will's father goes by 'Bill', and as he correctly assumed, the dozen or so men and women are all that remains of Will's tribe after he went to Rome.

Hannibal tells Bill what he can; he tells Bill how Will lived with fishermen, for a while. How he boarded a ship to Rome because he thought there would be food there, and how Will came to be a fierce warrior.

At that, Bill looks troubled, and shakes his head with a sigh, mutters. Alana translates; "That boy always liked a good scrap."

Hannibal smiles, and looks down at his feet.

"Tell me," Bill says, and Alana repeats, "how did he die?"

Hannibal swallows.

"He died saving me," Margot says, in the Hibernian tongue while Alana repeats it to Hannibal in Latin. "My brother was not a kind man, and he tried to plot to have Will, and Hannibal, and all my friends here killed. Will tried to get us all out, and while he and Hannibal were rescuing me, he…" She stops, breathes in, and squeezes Alana's hand when it's offered. "He told us to go, and that he would buy us some time. But he never made it to the boat."

Bill's brow is heavy, his eyes dark.

"We waited as long as we could," Margot finishes.

"Your son fought bravely," Hannibal says, waiting for Alana to finish translating before he continues; "He was a brave and loyal friend, to the last. I tried to get him to come with us, or I would have stayed behind with him if I knew what he meant to do, but…"

Bill holds up a hand, stopping his words.

He stands, and Hannibal watches as Bill approaches, until he's standing in front of Hannibal, blocking him from the fire's light. He looks as a huge, imposing statue, the judgement of every god looking down on Hannibal.

Then, Bill looks to Alana, at Hannibal's side, and back at Hannibal. He speaks, but Hannibal needs no translation.

"Do you love him?"

He does not know the difference between 'Did' and 'Do', but the answer remains the same:

"Yes," Hannibal says, and nods. "Tá."

Bill's head tilts, and then he smiles.

They toast to Will's memory, and Alana explains to Hannibal that it is not in the custom of Hibernians to mourn the death or loss of someone, but rather to celebrate their life. Hannibal can see why – he could not imagine, in a land so beautiful and alive as this, that death even seems so permanent. They exist in the grasses, in the stones, the mountains, the trees. In every animal and every person, they are alive.

One of the men starts a song, and Hannibal's heart rabbits in his chest to hear it. It starts slow, a lilting piece and though the man's voice is not as lovely as Will's, it is still beautiful and clear, and then a woman joins him, and another man, and soon they are all smiling and swaying to it, their hands lifted up as the fire burns and crackles between them all.

"What is this song?" he whispers to Alana and Margot.

Alana smiles. "It's about a young lover, who was sent away to fight another man's war. It is about how the singer has no love, no joy in them anymore. It is a song about waiting for your hero to come home." And it swells, and gains harmonies, and the wind seems to whisper along to it, the grass rustling, and Hannibal feels vibrancy in this place.

They continue to sing, until Hannibal cannot bear it – he feels he might burst if he were to remain sitting a single second longer. He rises, and waves off Alana's concerned gaze, and goes to the little field where the horses are grazing. His dappled mare approaches him, undoubtedly hoping for a treat, and he smiles and pets her soft cheek, allowing her to lip at his cloak.

"Hannibal."

He turns, nodding to Francis as the other man approaches. Francis sighs, and leans against the fence, and Hannibal's horse deems him unfit to nose at anymore, and turns away to join her friends.

"Randall and I will leave, come morning," Francis says. Hannibal looks to him, blinks. "You are welcome to join us."

Hannibal presses his lips together, and looks down at his folded hands. "I don't think I can," he replies. Francis nods, like he expected this answer. "I must stay with Alana, and Margot. And I -."

Francis holds up a hand, turns, and smiles. "I did not come here to convince you, one way or another," he says lightly, and holds his hand out. "Farewell, my friend. I hope fate is kinder to the both of us the second time around."

Hannibal nods, and clasps Francis' forearm, both of them squeezing over each other's brand. "I wish you every happiness in the world, brother," he murmurs, for they are brothers, united in freedom and by blood, more so than Hannibal would have ever considered any other man.

Francis smiles. "Come, now, don't stand here brooding like an old man. The fire is warm, and the sky is clear, and in this place we are among friends."

Hannibal sighs, and nods. He supposes it's pointless to try and find the same kind of solace in a field of horses as he shared with Will, on the edge of the cliffs, listening to his song. When he returns, there is a drink being passed around, the scent of which is sharp and smells vaguely of the food they give to horses. He drinks it, and it is sour and somehow heavy, and Bill laughs and claps his shoulder when he grimaces at the taste.

He says something, and Margot giggles. "No wine for us here!"

Hannibal smiles.

Time passes, as time is wont to do whether Hannibal would wish it to or not. Francis and Randall take the two grey horses, leaving Hannibal's dappled mare behind, and head West. Alana grows with child each passing day, to week, to month. Hannibal is no less awestruck by the greenery of the land, the brilliance of the sky, nor the sheer peace that this place brings to him. He dedicates every hour he has to learning the Hibernian language, and learns quickly, as he helps them build two additional houses for himself, and the women, and learns how to make fishing line and nets, and the practice of tanning hide and preparing jerky for the winter.

He was worried for Margot and Alana, unsure how they would adapt to life in this wild, lovely land, but Margot seems to be thriving in this place. Hardly an hour goes by where she is not grinning like a child, alight with joy – oh, there is healing in this place, Hannibal is certain of it. She speaks with the other women and takes up the art of stitching and mending clothes, minding the sheep, and Alana assists with cooking until it becomes difficult for her to stand or move too much.

When it rains, during the night, Hannibal is silent and alone, sitting on a little hill that overlooks the lake. The rain is gentle, here, more like mist, and he cannot smell it coming, cannot see heavy clouds on the horizon, without thinking of Will.

Bill joins him on one such night, and Hannibal smiles at him, and nods to an open patch of grass by his side. Bill sits with a hearty sigh, wincing in that way old men do when they protest their aching bodies.

"Damn cold night to be out here, my friend," Bill says. Hannibal smiles. Bill likes to call him 'My friend' instead of his name. Most of the tribe here slur it, finding it difficult to pronounce and, when they do manage, it sounds more like 'Hahnbull'. He doesn't mind.

He sighs, and looks up again. Says, simply, "Will is in the rain."

Bill is silent for a long while, and then makes a gruff sound, drawing Hannibal's attention. He fishes out a skin from his belt and uncorks it, handing it to Hannibal. It smells of that terrible oat drink. He drinks it anyway.

"You talk about him the way I used to talk about Shannon." Hannibal's head tilts. "His mother."

Hannibal smiles. "He spoke highly of both of you," he replies. Recalls how Margot had said he and Will reminded her of her own parents. He thinks, privately, that Bill and Shannon would be a much more flattering comparison. "She sounded like a remarkable woman."

"She was," Bill replies, quietly, his eyes shadowed with old grief. His eyes are much like Will's, but Hannibal has not seen them go gold, and they are more often the deep blue of stormy seas than brighter things, like ice and sea stones. "The most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Smart, too, could just look at you and know everything she needed to know. Couldn't lie to her worth a damn." Hannibal laughs, and Bill takes another swig of his drink.

Bill clears his throat, and whispers, "You know what Will was, yes?"

Hannibal nods. "I found out very quickly, thanks to Alana and her father's lessons to her," he replies. "He never hid what he was from me, and with him I was shown…so many things. Wonderful things that I will never forget." His throat turns tight, like wire is wrapped around his neck, threatening to choke him, and he breathes in deeply and licks his lips, tasting rainwater. "I suppose you're going to tell me that life goes on, and it is good to mourn, but not to linger on the shades of those you loved?"

Bill huffs, and coughs into his hand. "Fuck that," he says, and Hannibal blinks at him, and laughs. "I have never loved another woman like I loved Shannon. I have fathered only one son, gods be praised for his life, and to me neither of them had any equal. If you find another person to love, that's your business, but I will not be the one to tell you to do it."

Hannibal smiles.

Bill scratches at his beard, picking absently at a piece of clumped dirt, and flicks it towards their feet. "Alana," he murmurs. "She has the blood of this land in her."

Hannibal nods.

"That is good. A child should be where his bloodline is." He looks at Hannibal, and hums. "You are far away from home."

Hannibal nods again.

"Will you journey back there?"

There are so many questions like that. Will he go, and when? Where will he try to find solace that will not be given him here, with the quiet lakes and the single high mountain and the grass and forests? Where will he go, where the air feels so desperately, wonderfully alive?

He shakes his head, finally, and sighs. "I would like to remain here, if I may," he says, and looks back at Bill, finds him smiling, and fond.

"Stay as long as you need, my friend," Bill replies, and claps Hannibal on the shoulder, using him as a brace to push himself to his feet. He salutes with his drink, and plods back towards the little cluster of houses. Hannibal sighs, and looks up at the sky, finds the moon peeking shyly from behind a ring of grey-haloed clouds.

Will is in the rain. He cups his hands, and looks down at his wet palms, before he lets the water drop, and sighs again.

Autumn comes, and Hannibal watches the leaves change color, turning orange and brown and red in a myriad of fire-stained trees, falling to the ground. With the darkening days and the longer nights comes whispers of winter, and the need to gather firewood and hunt as much meat as possible before most of the game ventures South, to warmer places.

Alana gives birth one such night, when frost has crept in along the grasses. Margot, and another woman whose name is Niamh, are in her house with her, and Hannibal paces around the fire with the rest of the men, listening to her screams and cries as she bears her child into the world.

There is a moment, singular, of silence, and then the high-pitched shriek of a newborn baby, and Hannibal almost collapses to the ground in relief.

Margot emerges a moment later, her face streaked with tears and wide smile on her face, and she laughs, and throws herself into Hannibal's arms. "A boy!" she says, hugging him tightly, and he smiles, and embraces her in turn. "Come, come inside! Come see."

Hannibal lets her take his hand and follows her into the house, where Alana is resting on a thick mat of pelts and blankets and furs. In her arms, pink and wet, is her son. The baby is warbling faintly, and Alana is pale, her hair curled in little sweaty marks across her forehead and down her neck, her skin shining.

Hannibal goes to her, and falls to his knees at her side as Margot brings her water, and Niamh smiles at them.

"You did wonderfully, Alana," she says, and pats Alana's foot, before she leaves the house.

Hannibal takes her free hand and kisses her knuckles, breathless at the sight of them both, alive and healthy. He has no words for her, cannot possibly put into any language how overjoyed he is, how relieved, how grateful that they all lived to see this day.

She smiles weakly at him, her lashes low, exhausted, surely. She turns her hand and pats Hannibal's jaw, sighing. "I'm tired," she says, and Hannibal laughs.

"Understandably so."

She sits up, wincing, and nods in thanks as Margot hands her a cup of water. She drinks.

"What will you name him?"

"I don't know, yet," Alana replies, and looks down at her son's face. The baby has quieted – Hannibal is sure entering the world is exhausting. Her head tilts, and she hands the cup back to Margot, before brushing reverent fingers across the baby's cheek.

"There's no hurry to decide."

She nods, and looks up at Hannibal, her eyes wide and shining with unshed tears. "Hannibal, I…" She swallows, swallows again. "I wanted to thank you. He wouldn't be here if it wasn't for what you did."

Hannibal presses his lips together, and looks away. "Alana, I -."

"I know, I know it wasn't just you, and I know we *all* owe our lives to – to him. And I know how much you miss him. I miss him too. But what happened, how it all happened, well…" She looks down at her son again, and her shoulders tremble, her fingers shake. "He's alive. And we're alive. And none of it could be possible without what you and Will did for us. So, thank you."

It is senseless to argue with her, he supposes, and she looks a single moment away from collapsing with exhaustion. So he nods, and smiles, and kisses her forehead. "Get some rest," he says, and Margot hugs him as they stand. He leaves the house and Bill is standing outside with Niamh, and turns to grin at Hannibal as he emerges.

"A healthy boy, I've been told!"

Hannibal nods.

"We are blessed. We have not been graced with the gift of a child for far too long."

"It is a sign," another woman says. "We must offer up a feast, to celebrate."

Bill nods. "And we will," he replies.

That night, they light a large fire and eat from the body of a deer Hannibal felled that morning, his mare having proven herself as a wonderful hunting partner and a capable bearer of heavy loads when the hunt proves bountiful.

Alana has recovered enough to present her son to the tribe, and names him Eoin. He is a docile baby, happy to suckle at her breast and remain untroubled by the hearty cries and happy songs that rise up in celebration of his birth.

Though Hannibal is happy, and relieved beyond measure to see his friends healthy and well, he cannot help feel the creeping chill of sorrow overcome him. He has stayed, and made himself at home here, and now Alana and Margot are happy, and together, and will be taken care of. They have each other, and their son, and there is nothing for him here, not really. Yes, he might wed one of the women here and father children, but he has touched a man who holds lightning in his hands. How could anyone else possibly compare to him?

He might wander, as he contemplated all those months ago, but he has grown comfortable here, and enjoys the company of this tribe. They are all brothers and sisters, in their way, and show a love and life that he has never seen before. This place is so peaceful, so bountiful and lovely, he is loathe to leave it.

He stands, and squeezes Alana's hand when he passes her, and goes out to the field that has become his mare's home. She whinnies at him in greeting, but doesn't trot over. He sighs, watching her dappled silhouette graze idly, and then frowns, eyes narrowing. Within the darkness, a shadow is also there.

Another horse, black and long-maned. Hannibal tilts his head.

He bows beneath the fence and approaches the animal, and it lifts its head and snorts at him. It is a stallion, and tosses its head at Hannibal, but doesn't rear or bolt. The horse whinnies again, and when Hannibal touches its shoulder, he feels a small dip in hair along the muscle, as though something or someone cut it. Deeply. Repeatedly.

"Who do you belong to, hmm?" he asks of the horse, whose only answer is to snort and return to grazing.

There were no new faces around the campfire, and Bill did not speak of any newcomer. However this horse came to be here, it certainly did not just wander in, but whoever owns it clearly doesn't want to be seen yet.

Hannibal goes tense at the thought. The likelihood that Mason might have survived and that Roman soldiers found them this far away are very, very small, but it is not impossible. Even less likely that he would send a single man, but the possibility of a scout is not entirely far-fetched. He has not quite gotten complacent enough to stop carrying his sword with him, and so he draws it silently. There are several sets of tracks around the field but one of them looks

fresher than the others, and was not made by any shoe worn by the tribe. The weight of it is heavier, hinting at a large man.

Hannibal growls under his breath, and circles back to the houses. He doesn't want to draw attention and risk anyone getting hurt, and if it is just a single man, he can deal with the threat quickly. He enters Alana's house first, finds it dark and cramped with the new addition of the baby's sleeping area, but there is no one inside. Next, Bill's house. Again, no one.

His is next. He prowls in and – there. There is someone, a flash of dark furs illuminated by firelight. Hannibal tightens his grip on his sword, and the person turns and the fire shines on brilliantly blue eyes, colored darkly beneath by sleepless nights. A mane of wild curls that Hannibal still remembers, clear as day. A beard, thin and near-black in the darkness, broad shoulders, strong legs. A branded arm.

Hannibal freezes.

"…Will?" he breathes.

Will turns, and oh, gods, it *is* him. It's him, his sweet smile and his sharp eyes and it's *him.* Hannibal closes the door behind him and drops his sword and rushes to Will, embracing him tightly. Will lets out a weak, terribly happy sound, and he might be weeping, Hannibal isn't sure, but he can't stand the thought of pulling apart from Will to find out.

Will clings to him, trembling, his face buried in Hannibal's neck. For a while, Hannibal can merely stand, crushing Will to him so tightly they might fuse into one being. He can't believe this is happening, he can't believe this is real.

Will pulls back, after a moment, and his eyes are bright and wet. Hannibal hurriedly turns, lighting a small lantern and setting it down on a table beside them, so he can better see Will's face. The year has not been too kind to Will – he looks gaunt and pale, starving, and Hannibal thinks of the cut on his horse and wonders how many animals he has bled dry on his way home.

Will licks his lips, whimpers, his fingers shaking when they reach for Hannibal and flatten on his chest. "Is this a dream?" he asks.

Hannibal wants to laugh. He wants to cry. "If it is, then we are both asleep, and I will kill whoever wakes us," he replies. Will's lips twitch, and he clutches at Hannibal as though ravenous. He looks so different from when Hannibal last saw him – no longer feral, savage, heavy with flesh and resigned to his fate. Now he has the look of a man determined to survive, damn the odds, and though his hands shake and his eyes are black, and when Hannibal touches him he has a defined skinniness to him, he is beautiful.

"I didn't know if you would be here," Will whispers, and he pets over Hannibal's neck, again, again, unable to draw his eyes away. Hannibal is sure he's starving. He swallows, and lifts his hands, pulling at the strings at the front of Will's cloak and pushing the garment off his shoulders, before turning to his own. Will's upper lip twitches, and he lets out a throaty snarl. "I didn't know if you'd -. I didn't -."

Hannibal tugs him close, wraps his fingers in Will's soft, warm curls, and forces his head up. Will gasps, sagging against him, clutching frantically.

Hannibal rests their foreheads together, and asks, in Will's language, "Are you still mine?"

Will lashes flutter, and he nods frantically, pawing at Hannibal's remaining clothes. "Yes, *yes*," he says, in his mother tongue. "Only you. And you are mine."

He has so many questions, but Will is starving, and Will is *here*, and nothing else matters.

"Hannibal," Will whispers, breathless and aching, he echoes Hannibal's need, draws it in and feeds off it and shows it back to him a thousand-fold. "I need you. I need to feel you and know you're real, and here, with me. *Please*."

Hannibal growls, and kisses him, pushing Will back towards the pile of furs and pelts he has called a bed for the last few months. Will's sharp teeth sink into his lower lip and Will moans when he splits skin, a single bead of blood teased out onto his tongue.

Will pulls back, eyes flashing golden, starkly glowing in the low lantern light. He snarls, showing his teeth, and lunges for another kiss, his hands wrapped tight in Hannibal's hair and tugging at the nape of his neck, eager for the crush of their bodies together.

Hannibal pushes Will to the bed, prowling over him and tugging frantically at Will's clothing, eager to feast his eyes on the sight of Will bare and willing for him once again. Not even in his dreams has he allowed himself to think of Will like this, and Will is still so beautiful, even with his stomach sunk in and his ribs too sharply exposed. Gone is the strength of a fighting dog – now he is lean and lithe, a creature designed perfectly for the task of luring Hannibal to him.

He cups Will's face, kisses him again, delighting at the burn of his short beard on Hannibal's lips. A strange sensation he has not encountered before, to kiss a man that is not shaved, but he finds he likes it. Will whines, reaches for him, and Hannibal's hand slides to his thick hair, pulls, and Will arches up, throat exposed, thighs spreading as Hannibal works the last piece of clothing off with his free hand.

"Hannibal," he breathes, and clutches, and claws. He spits on two fingers and sinks them between his legs and kisses, kisses, bruises Hannibal's sore lower lip and bites at his jaw and sucks, wanton, at his neck. "Fill me, fill me." And hearing Will beg for him in his own language is somehow so much more powerful, like the language itself is magic, and maybe it is but Hannibal can understand it now, and he eagerly, desperately, wants to obey.

He rears up, pulls his shirt over his head and unfastens his trousers, pushing them down to his knees. Will's eyes are a brilliant gold, no blue to them, and he leans up as well, licks Hannibal's chest, sinks his nails around his hips and groans, tails the sound with something ravenous.

Hannibal cups his head, forces him down again, and spits onto his hand, wetting his cockhead. He knows he should be gentler with Will, should take more time and make sure

he's stretched, but he also knows Will is starving and it is Hannibal's duty, his honor, to feed him.

And Will is breathless, desperate for it. He digs his nails into Hannibal's back and rakes.

Hannibal leans down, kisses Will deeply, and tucks his free hand behind one of Will's knees, lifts and folds him, and Will's hand wraps around Hannibal's cock and guides them together. Hannibal feels him, the slick give of him, that tight heat he hasn't felt for far too long.

He pushes in, and Will screams, snarls and bites down savagely at Hannibal's neck, over the bite he left a lifetime ago. Hannibal trembles, growls, snaps forward with his hips until he is fully sheathed inside of Will, and Will spasms around him, tight and hot and greedy. He drinks, and Hannibal shows his neck and wraps his arms around Will, covers and consumes him as he is, in turn, consumed.

Will snarls, more animal than man in this moment, arches against Hannibal and clings to him like rain to a blade of grass, hands running down Hannibal's flanks, tearing open his sides in little red lines. His heels dig into Hannibal's ass and thighs, urging him on. His teeth refuse to leave Hannibal's neck, he bites down, snarls.

Hannibal closes his eyes, body trembling, vision dark at the edges as Will drinks from him. He buries his face in Will's neck and shudders, tugging lightly on Will's hair to try and ease him away. Will snarls, clamps down harder like a dog refusing to let go of its prize.

"Will," Hannibal rasps.

Will growls, tongue laving warm and wet on Hannibal's neck. Hannibal's pace has slowed inside of him, too drained and dizzy to keep going, and he rears up, rolling them until he is straddling Hannibal, and he plants his hands on Hannibal's chest, taking over.

He is beautiful, red smeared down his mouth and chin, his neck, his jutting clavicles.

Hannibal holds onto him by the hips, and watches him as one might watch a god descend from the heavens. Will licks his lips, lashes fluttering closed, and bows his head, leaning down and pulling Hannibal up for a kiss.

"Hannibal," he whispers, plaintive and soft. "Please."

Hannibal moans when Will kisses him again, drinks down his cries as Will goes still, tightening up. Hannibal's nails sink in and he shivers, hips twitching up as he empties himself inside Will.

Will collapses over him with a sob, hands shaking as he pets over Hannibal's sore neck, his chest. When he leans up and Hannibal can see his face, his expression is a heavy mask of such stark relief, Hannibal can't breathe.

He lets out a curse, rubbing a hand over his face, and when his eyes open they are blue, and wet, shining. His trembling fingers touch Hannibal's cheek, he swallows, and says, "I had… forgotten how it felt to touch you."

Hannibal pushes himself upright. Dizziness be damned, how could he not embrace Will, after saying that? Will shivers, his lashes low and his arms tight around Hannibal's shoulders. Through their reunion, he didn't get hard, and he didn't finish, but Hannibal is sure that's a side effect of being hungry. His body has no energy to give – he will, soon. Hannibal will feed and fill him until Will has lost the darkness beneath his eyes, until he shines and smiles and has enough power in him to bring the rain. He will never see Will go hungry again.

"Touch me," he says, in Will's language. He would happily never utter Latin again if he didn't have to. Will smiles at him, weak with happiness, and they roll together, Hannibal pulling back from the clutch of Will's body and taking Will in his arms.

Will presses to his side, purring finely, and pulls Hannibal's cloak around their bare bodies. His cheek is on Hannibal's shoulder and Hannibal entertains himself with petting through his hair, marveling at the softness of it. He presses his nose to Will's hair, breathing in his scent – horse, rain, the particular sweetness of grass.

"Will," Hannibal breathes, and Will lets out a soft hum. "What happened?"

Will presses his lips together, turns his head to kiss Hannibal's chest, eyes lifted so their gazes can meet. But he doesn't hold it. His eyes drop, and his hand curls against Hannibal's collarbone, and he drags his thumb towards his mouth, and bites down on the nail.

"I killed them all," he says.

Hannibal swallows. "We sailed by the cliffs," he says. "I saw Bedelia and Anthony's bodies. Jack's whip." Will hums again, sounding exhausted, and Hannibal gentles his petting but does not stop. "Some of the guards."

"They were all just meat," Will says. "I killed them. One…by one…" His fingers dance along Hannibal's chest, down to where his heart rests, then back up. "Some of them fled. Mason was so angry at them, but then there were no more, and he tried to run." A tremor runs down Will's spine, and he snarls. "He couldn't run from me.

I wanted to throw him into the ocean. I dragged him there by his hair and cut pieces of his face off and threw it over while he screamed." Hannibal's hand tightens in Will's hair. It is easy to forget, sometimes, just how savage Will can be. He has always been so gentle with Hannibal, with Alana and Margot.

Suddenly, Will goes tense, and he rises from the bed. Hannibal frowns, follows with his eyes to a bag that Hannibal does not own. Will opens it, and the bottom of it is red, stained and old and dry. He grins at Hannibal and sits down on the bed again, and opens the bag. Immediately the room is filled with the scent of salted, cured meat.

Will reaches in, and takes out a piece. Hannibal's fingers curl, and he looks at Will with wide eyes.

"You don't have to eat it," he murmurs. "But I wanted to offer."

Hannibal takes it – it looks no different from deer jerky, though perhaps paler, and pinker. His eyes on Will, he takes a bite, and Will smiles, purring loudly as he chews and swallows. It tastes good, startlingly so. Will fishes out a piece for himself, chewing idly on the end of it, and though Hannibal knows it does not fill him like fresh meat does, Will looks distinctly pleased at devouring it. When each of them is finished, Will sets the bag down, and prowls back into Hannibal's bed.

Hannibal can look at him, now, for real. There are scars along Will's flanks, deep cuts healed over in his shoulder. His thigh bears a thin white line from Hannibal's sword, when anger made him rash and boorish. His shoulder has been reset, but he is bruised at his thighs, around his waist, and he has marks on him that Hannibal recognizes as being strikes from a whip. He wishes he had the power to wipe it all clean.

"He pushed me over the cliff with him," Will murmurs, touching the backs of Hannibal's hands as they flatten on his hips. "His body took most of the blow, but I was not without injury." He smiles. "Thankfully, the ocean is my friend. I washed ashore and ate the pieces that were given to me, lived off fish and dead birds until I was healed enough to move. And then I followed you, but I didn't know where you might have gone. I had hoped Alana would remember where I told her I was from, but that was a fool's hope."

Hannibal swallows. "We are both fools, then."

Will smiles, his eyes bright.

"Will, I am so sorry," Hannibal says. "If I had known, I would have taken you from that place immediately. We waited, on the docks, and when you did not come I thought…"

Will nods, and his hands tighten. "Margot and Alana were the priority," he says sharply. "You did what you had to." His face softens, and he smiles. "I'm not angry with you, my love." He leans down, pets Hannibal's hair from his face, cups his neck and kisses him. "I am the happiest I have ever been."

Hannibal swallows harshly, clings to Will and kisses him again. "As am I."

They spend the night together, moving in the shadows cast by Hannibal's lantern. Will is ravenous for him, and Hannibal is just as much a slave to the hunger in Will, ignited, alight, so supremely happy that he would readily stay in this place forever, with Will in his arms, Will's thighs around his hips, Will's nails in his back.

But he is being selfish, and while Will can live on Hannibal alone, Hannibal cannot survive off Will. They rise with the dawn, and dress, and Will follows Hannibal out as they go to the communal garden to harvest what has been planted.

"There was a celebration last night," Will eyes, eyeing the dead pyre. "What were you celebrating?"

"Alana gave birth," Hannibal replies, and smiles at the look of utter joy that crosses Will's face. "A healthy boy, named Eoin."

"'Well-born'," Will says with a nod. "A fine name."

Hannibal smiles, and they go to the garden, finding Niamh and Margot already there. Margot looks up in an absent wave, and then freezes, her head snapping up and her eyes widening in disbelief. Even with Will's longer hair, and his beard, and his change of clothes, there is no denying his wide smile, his brilliant eyes, and the way he and Hannibal stand so close together.

"Will? Is that -? *Will*?" She jumps up and rushes to him, and he laughs, catching her in his arms and hugging her tightly. Niamh is staring at them, and then Margot laughs, loud enough to apparently draw attention from the rest of the tribe. Niamh rushes past them, out of the garden and towards the gathering.

"Will is here! He's alive!"

Will puts Margot down, cups her face and rests their foreheads together. "I'm so happy you're here," she whispers, fingers trembling around Will's arms. "We thought you were dead."

Will smiles, and pulls her into another embrace, before Bill's voice rings out through the crowd.

"Where is he? Will!"

Will lets her go, and turns. "Father," he says, his voice heavy and happy. There are tears in his eyes as the older man approaches him, and Hannibal knows this body language well – a soldier, standing before his king. Will plants his fist over his heart and bows his head.

Hannibal had never taken Bill to be a man reserved in giving out physical affection, but he watches as Bill nods, smiling, and clasps Will's forearm as Hannibal clasped Francis'. He supposes, when your child is not technically human, the rules change. Indeed, the already-vibrant air is buzzing with electricity, with jubilance. Hannibal would not put it past every animal and every blade of grass to join up in a chorus of happy song.

Will and Bill part, and Will clears his throat. "I was told Alana has had her son," he says. Hannibal steps up by him, unwilling to be parted for a second longer, and takes and squeezes Will's hand. Margot, on Will's other side, smiles and nods.

"Come," she says. "I know she'll be so happy to see you."

Alana is sleeping in her and Margot's house when they enter, her son in a little bowl of blankets by her side. She's turned towards him, one hand resting on the rise of blankets. Will and Margot approach quietly, Hannibal holding back so they don't crowd her, and there is such reverence on his face when he kneels by Alana and Eoin.

"Would you like to hold him?" Margot whispers. "He's a calm baby."

Will shakes his head. "I shouldn't," he replies. "Not until he's older."

Margot blinks, but doesn't argue. There is still so much about Will that none of them know.

"I can't believe you survived," Margot adds after another moment of silence. "I mean, of course you did, because you're here, unless this is some kind of dream or magic."

Will smiles. "Not a dream," he murmurs.

Alana stirs, suddenly, her eyes fluttering open. She groans, grimacing in pain, still sore after giving birth, and Margot reaches out to brush her hair away from her face as she wipes at her eyes. Alana blinks, blinks again, and then she sees Will, and sits upright.

Will smiles at her, takes her hand and kisses her knuckles. Unlike Hannibal, unlike Margot, Alana doesn't ask his name in question. She doesn't say anything, merely clutches at Will's hands with her own, her eyes welling up and spilling over.

Will kisses her hands again, lets her touch his face and his arms, before her hands fall. "I am…so happy to be with you all again," he says, quietly. He turns and looks at Hannibal, who comes forward and takes Will's hand, helping him to his feet. Will fits against him perfectly, even malnourished and recovering from his long famine. Hannibal pets through his hair, grips it gently, and kisses his forehead.

"What happened?" Alana whispers.

Will hums. "Perhaps a story for the fire," he replies. "I'm sure many people will want to hear it."

They nod, and Hannibal embraces Will, sensing a fine tremor of exhaustion running through him. They did not sleep much last night, and he is sure Will is still hungry. He gives Margot and Alana a nod and smile, and then takes Will outside. Those of the tribe that are milling around smile widely and cry out in greeting, but no one rushes Will, demands his attention or his touch. Perhaps that is the way, around here.

They go back into Hannibal's house – Hannibal's and Will's, if Will desires – and Hannibal lays him out on the bedding again, shedding his cloak and sword and crawling in behind him. Will sighs, clings to him, kisses hungrily at his neck.

"You did as I asked," he breathes, pawing gracelessly at Hannibal's clothing as Hannibal tugs at his. "You did everything I asked. Because of you, they're alive. Thank you, Hannibal."

"It was your sacrifice that got us here," Hannibal replies, and kisses Will passionately as they bare each other's skin. Will growls, arching close, his lips soft and teeth sharp when they bite down on Hannibal's collarbone.

Will shivers, spreading his thighs, and he rolls over, fishing between two sets of pelts, and pulls out a pouch that bears a marked resemblance to the one Hannibal used to use, full of oil. He opens it and what comes out is closer to a paste, and smells of fat, but when Will's hand

wraps around Hannibal's cock, it eases the slide wonderfully, and Hannibal snarls, bowing his head and nosing at Will's neck.

Will discards the pouch, his other hand slick and sinking between his legs. He's hard as well, sated enough to be desperate, well-fed enough to take pleasure in this now. And Hannibal is glad, because it means Will is getting better.

"Do you want to stay here?" Will asks.

Hannibal lifts his head, rests their foreheads together, and brushes a hand through Will's hair. Gods, how long had he thought about petting Will just like this? And now he can – Will's hair will never be short again if he has his way.

Finally, he swallows, and smiles. "I don't care where we are," he murmurs, and that is the truth. "As long as I am with you."

Will trembles for him, and lets out a sweet, needy whine. His fingers pull from his body and Hannibal is quick to take over, pushing Will's thighs apart. He ruts against the crease of Will's hip, marveling at just how warm, how sweetly soft he is here, before Will growls with impatience, lifts his hips, and Hannibal guides his cockhead to Will and pushes inside.

Will cries out, wanton and loud, as unashamed as he has always been when Hannibal is inside him. He claws at Hannibal's back, thighs tight and tense around Hannibal's hips, his face a mask of pleasure as Hannibal fucks him.

Will's head tilts, showing his neck, the age-old scar of Hannibal's bite still stark and pale on his blush-red skin. Hannibal leans down, nuzzles it, growls when Will tightens and trembles, eager for him. His nails dig into Will's hips, planting him on the bed, his shoulders rolling up into Will's hands, and then Will turns his head and kisses him and it's all Hannibal can do to breathe.

"Never leave me again," he demands, and Will's eyes shine, beautiful and wide. He nods frantically, pawing at Hannibal's chest, his flanks, digs in and tightens his legs to urge Hannibal deeper inside him. They're both slick with sweat, overheated and overjoyed in their bed, and Hannibal never wants to go another day without this for the rest of his life.

He grips Hannibal's hair, the grease on his fingers slicking it to his neck. "Kiss me," he whispers, and Hannibal falls against him, tugs on Will's hair and snarls and kisses him, steals his air, tastes meat and water in his mouth. Will goes tense, bearing down with a soft whimper, his eyes squeezed tightly shut and teeth bared as he wraps a hand around his cock, stroking with slow, long motions, dragging his orgasm out as he comes between their bellies.

Hannibal growls, bowing his head, slams deep as he feels Will's body spasm around him, pleasure tight and heavy in his gut at the sound of Will's sweet moans, the raking claw of his free hand, the desperate grip of his sweaty thighs.

He grabs Will by the nape and kisses him, rutting as deep as he can to fill Will as much as possible as he comes, and Will gasps weakly, lashes fluttering. He breaks the kiss and shows

his neck and Hannibal growls, kisses and sucks a smattering of bruises along the exposed, sweet flesh.

Finally, he is too soft to stay inside, and he pulls out and they roll together, facing each other under a cover of furs to ward away the cold.

Will shivers, and gently touches Hannibal's cheek. "Did you mean it?" he asks. Hannibal's head tilts. "I would like to stay here, for a while. Would you stay with me?"

Hannibal smiles; the thought that he would not is laughable. He takes Will's hand and kisses his wrist. "I meant every word," he replies. He tries to find the words that could describe how it felt to be without Will, even in a land so vibrant and wonderful as this. He swallows, and presses Will's hand to his chest. "Could you feel how I ached for you?"

Will's lashes go low, he swallows, and nods. "Yes."

"I would never be parted from you again."

Will smiles. "Then rejoice," he replies, "for neither would I."

Hannibal smiles, widely, his chest flushing with warmth, with love, and he reaches for Will and pulls him close, kisses and pets him and does not stop until Will's eyes shine with gold and blue equally, like buried treasure in a sunken ship. Hannibal's, all Hannibal's for the taking.

It rains, that day, and for three days after, and the entire time there is laughter, and joy, and when it is done the tribe lights a fire and they dance and sing their praises to the gods of this land, whom Hannibal thinks are much kinder and gentler than those of Rome.

Hannibal does not know where Will is leading him, but he doesn't complain. They ride to the edge of the forest and leave their horses tied loosely to trees so that they don't wander, and then Will takes his hand and walks down the slope of the mountain, towards the lake. They walk for several miles before the ground angles up, and the trees clear.

It is not nearly as formidable as the cliffs outside Mason's ludus, but the little hill creates a sharp overlook to the lake like the one on which Hannibal sat for all those months, and with the orange-brown trees reflected in the clear, motionless water, it feels peaceful and warm, humidity clinging to the air as Will approaches the edge and sits. The sky is dark with lingering storm clouds, and he is sure that the rain has not finished, but has given them a small reprieve.

He pats the ground beside him, and Hannibal smiles, and sits as well. The rain has made the ground slick, and it seeps into his ass and thighs, but he doesn't mind.

Will sighs, folding his arms on one knee, heel braced on the edge of the overlook. He is smiling, eyes half-lidded, radiating calm like some old forest spirit. It is different from his

aura upon the cliffs – this is a Will who is happy to be home, sated to the bone, in the company of beloved friends and family.

Will turns his head and meets Hannibal's eyes, his smile wide and soft. He reaches out, takes Hannibal's hand, and brings it to his lips for a kiss. Then, he leans in, and puts his cheek to Hannibal's shoulder, Hannibal's head resting against his hair. Below them, Hannibal catches glimpses of bright-scaled fish, milling about below the surface of the lake, and wonders absently if it ever freezes over completely.

Will sighs, breath misting, and nuzzles closer to Hannibal's side, warm and soft as a hibernating mouse. Hannibal wraps an arm around his shoulders, a hand in his hair. Will settles against him, humming happily, and closes his eyes.

They don't speak. They don't need to.

Above them, the clouds sink down and open again, and the air is warm. The rain is gentle on their faces, and Will wraps his cloak around their bodies to shield them from the worst of it, and Hannibal smiles, and he cannot help but rejoice.

Chapter End Notes

and there you have it! I hope you guys enjoyed the ride and liked the ending. Even though I know Alana's kid is Morgan in the show I wanted to give him a super-Irish name and every Eoin/Owen I've met has been a delight so.

See you guys in the next fic! Have a wonderful day, I love you all <3

Works inspired by this one

A Feast of Flesh by HigherMagic

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